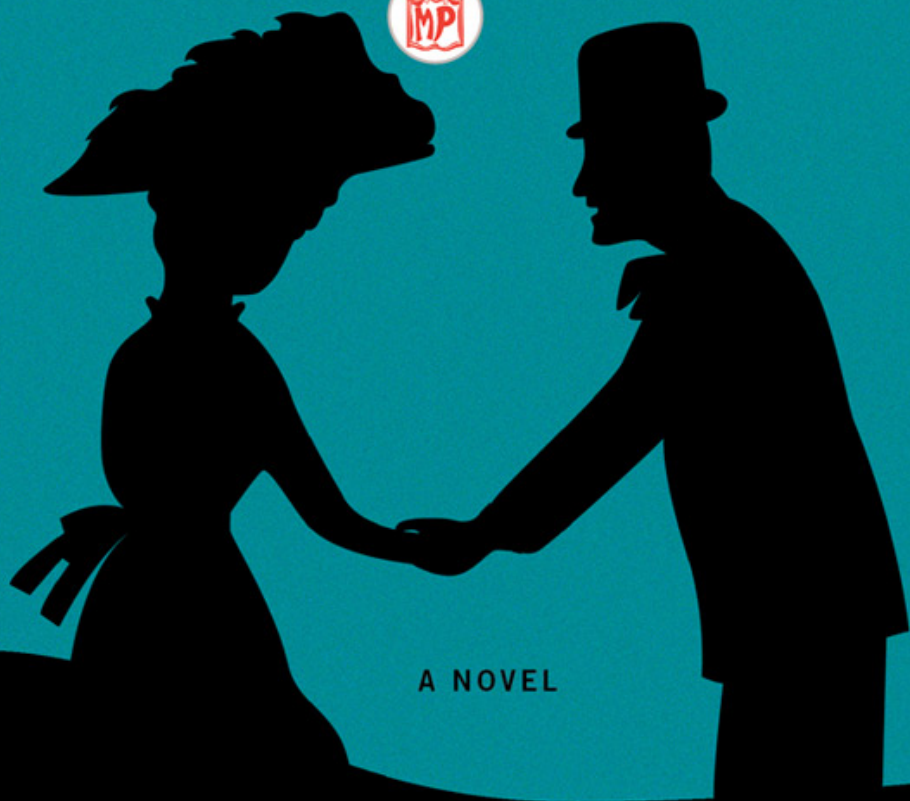


A MYSTERIOUSPRESS.COM BOOK



A NOVEL

THE BRIDES OF ABERDAR CHRISTIANN BRAND



The Brides of Aberdar

A Novel

Christianna Brand

A MysteriousPress.com
Open Road Integrated Media
Ebook

*To the loving memory of Anthea Joseph; and to Jenny Dereham
who, in the very pattern of Anthea herself with me has taken her
place.*

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

HOW VERY STRAIGHT SHE stands, thought the young man, and how very strange she seems! How strange it all is, bringing me out here in this—odd—way. She doesn't like it, he thought, she's angry with Christina for bringing me. And Christina's parents are not to be told. Why not? It's only a path on the hillside, looking across a stream to the opposite hill...(I'm taking you somewhere—secret,' Christina had said.)

The woman stood very straight, very alien in the springtime woodland, in her brown stuff dress with the bustle making a stiffly rounded prominence patched on to her erect, spare figure. She said: 'There is no need to take the pony from the shafts, Mr Hargrove. We shall not stay long enough.'

'It's no trouble. And he's trotted us here a good many miles and has to trot us back again.' He led the pony away to where he could hitch the reins to a tree. Christina said, sotto voce: 'Don't fuss, Tetty darling!' A scatter of small white dogs leapt about her, muddying her white dress with scrabbling little paws. 'Take this family for a long walk along the path and give us just a little while alone together.'

'That would not be proper, Christina.'

'But I must! I must tell him, you know it's right that I should.'

'Your mama and papa—'

'It's too painful for them. But if we're hoping to become betrothed, he ought to be told all the truth.'

'You don't know all the truth. You wouldn't understand it.'

‘Only a born Hilbourne, of Aberdar, could understand it. I have the blood and I can understand it; I can sort of—feel it. No one else—except for my mother; and you, because you brought them up, my mother and my Aunt Christine, and you’re a part of it all. Everyone just believes my poor aunt was insane.’

She unbent a little, spoke less grimly: ‘Would it not be simpler, child, to just leave it at that?’

‘And marry with the threat of family madness hanging over me? That, at least, I must explain to him, you know I must—and show him the house.’

‘There is no house now,’ said the woman and, using her severe brown parasol as a stick, with her accompaniment of little dancing dogs, walked swiftly away.

‘There was once,’ said the girl. She tugged her lover’s hand to bring him to sit down with her on the old dried bracken, looking across the valley and the little stream.

‘There was a house there, down below us, across the stream. It was here that my father sat on that other day, long ago, when he was a little boy, looking over towards it. There was a house then...’

Without promise—in all the exquisite burgeoning of that long-ago springtime, only the house had seemed without promise, lying like a dead bird in the hollow of the hill. About it, the trees were a-shimmer in their filament of new green, but the timbers that had gone to the building of the house had been dead three hundred years; its mullioned windows stared back blindly into the eye of the sun. To the boy watching from the wooded slopes of the valley, it had seemed that the very doorway was a mouth, gaping open, jaw-dropped, in the rigidity of death.

And yet there was life of a sort in the house; for from

the mouth came tiny figures, black clad and yet all bright with the flowers they held in their hands; and up the curving drive pranced small, jetty horses, lifting delicate hooves, drawing a carriage fantastically shaped and carved. The boy moved closer, curiously; and, on an impulse, hitched his pony to a tree and began to plunge down the slope through the tossing daffodils and so made his way to the back of the old house and through the cold stone passages and up the narrow servants' stairs. In the nursery he found, as he had expected, two little girls hanging out of the window so their pantalets showed up, white cambric with lace and embroidery at the ankles, beneath their stiff black skirts.

They looked back over their shoulders. 'Oh, Lawrence, do come and look! It's our mother's funeral!' They made way for him.

'My father said I was not to come over for a few days,' said the boy. 'But *I* didn't care. I just came.'

They stared at him solemnly. Daring Lawrence: brave Lawrence!

He jostled himself in between them. 'Why did your mother die?'

'We don't know. She just died. We went to her room to see her when she was dead; she was lying on the big bed and there were four big candles at the corners. We thought she was asleep, but Tante Louise said she was dead.'

'And we saw her before that too,' said the other little girl. 'She smiled and said, "Tell me you think they are pretty, my little ones?" So Lyneth said "Yes" because there was nobody else to tell her. Didn't you, Lyn?'

'She was talking to herself,' said Lyneth. 'It was funny. Do *you* think we're pretty, Lawrence?'

'Of course you're pretty, everyone knows that,

everybody says how pretty you are. And alike as two peas,' he added, teasing them.

'Dr Horder told Papa we should grow up to be the belles of the county. "Lyneth and Christine," he said, "the Belles of Aberdar."' '

'But Papa didn't like it, he turned away and his face went pale and he said, "It might be better otherwise." What did he mean by that?'

'I expect he meant that there are better things than having blue eyes and silly pale gold hair. It's nothing for girls to be pretty. They all ought to be.'

'He didn't mean us to hear it. He'd forgotten we were there.'

'What did your mother say?'

'She wasn't there. She was in her room, she always was; we hardly ever saw her. Some people see their mothers every day. You do, Lawrence, don't you?'

Lyneth hung perilously out of the window. 'Look, they're bringing out a great big box, a long box like the flowers have been coming in, only much bigger! What's in the box? Do you think there are flowers in the box, Lawrence?'

The boy was a little scared, very much embarrassed. He said at last, gruffly: 'Yes.'

'I don't think it's flowers,' said Christine. 'I think it's our mother. I think she's in the box.'

'She doesn't mind,' said Lawrence quickly. 'She's asleep, she doesn't mind being in the box.'

'The other people mind her being there. Look, Lyn, Papa is crying. So there, grown-ups *can* cry!'

'Tante Louise isn't crying,' said Lyneth.

'She's afraid that her face will go smudgy if she does and black stuff will come off on her eyes. That's because

she's foreign. The other lady isn't crying but the beautiful tall young gentleman, he looks frightened and sad. Why should he look frightened?'

'I can't see any gentleman,' said Lawrence, tipping further forward out of the window to gaze down upon the bare heads and black beribboned bonnets below. 'Only Dr Meredith and old Johnson from the lawyer's, and Hil, of course, and the servants. And there isn't any lady except your Tante Louise.'

'Christine means the pretty lady standing beside the box.'

'I can't see any lady,' said Lawrence again.

The horses recognised a familiar jerk and creak of the springs as the coffin was hoisted up into the hearse. Long-faced men, top-hatted and faintly smelling of the fortifying draughts at the village inn, clambered up after it and, deft from long practice, arranged the spring flowers among the ebony and silver furnishings. The groom restrained the scuffing hooves of the horses with a respectful muffled 'Whoa! Whoa!' Four men descended from the hearse and took up their positions, two on either side; mourning ribbons hung down from the backs of their shining tall hats. 'They look like black candles: like the big candles by our mother's bed when she was dead,' said Christine.

The widower glanced up at the window as the cortège started to move at foot pace down the drive. Two small hands waved at him, and he gave back a gentle, rather helpless smile. Tante Louise, frowning, told herself that it was her duty now to remain in this cold grey England, and take over the charge of these little ones, so distressingly *mal-élevées*. Her hooped skirt and huge leg-o'-mutton sleeves were surmounted by a white cashmere shawl; her high bonnet shrouded in crape veiling. She mounted into the

family carriage; the widower, moving like an automaton, stepped up after her. The doctor, lawyer and handful of servants, climbed up into two following carriages and drove slowly away. But of the pretty lady and the beautiful young man who had looked sad and frightened, there was now no sign; and when, that evening, the little girls asked their father what had become of them, his pale face grew ashen and he pitched forward in a dead faint across the arm of his chair. The wine glass on the covered tray at his hand fell with a tinkling crash and left a red stain upon the snow white cloth.

Did he sleep? Did he dream? The widower, returned but an hour from the funeral of his young wife, deathly weary, deathly sad. In a room unchanged almost from the time of its first creating—was it in a dark dream that he saw them as once indeed they had gathered there? Lenora, darkly beautiful, with the lovely rounded figure which seemed to have no angle even in the bent arm or knee—the wide ruff, wire-stiffened, the jewelled slipper peeping out from beneath the jewel-spattered satin petticoat, below the great hooped velvet skirt of midnight blue. And Richard, her brother, with the red-gold hair of the Hilbournes, tall, splendid, in all the elegance of a gentleman of Elizabeth's court, come a-wooing (a second coach would have lumbered and rumbled up the hills after their own, carrying all this magnificence)—skirted doublet of emerald green, sleeves slashed to show the crimson silk beneath, over gartered hose, a hiked dagger at his thigh: red bows upon red-heeled shoes, a single earring, one huge, swinging pearl. The short jacket, designed to hang with its empty sleeve over the left shoulder, was of Moroccan leather as soft as silk and muskily scented. Indeed, they were both richly

scented, the perfume seemed to pervade all the room. And Sir Edward Hilbourne, the Squire, bowing a welcome. 'I trust you are rested after your long journey?'

'Pretty well, cousin,' said Lenora, shrugging, 'though it was tedious enough, the coach rocked severely by your vile mountainous roads; the last part of the way, my brother, impatient as ever, stretched his long legs, getting out and walking with the horses.'

'It is not often that Aberdar is privileged to entertain guests from the court. If it is to occur more frequently, I perceive that we must repair the approaches which, so far, have done well enough for us country folk; it was but yesterday, however, that we had notice of your coming. Meanwhile, you are rested? A collation was sent up to you? Will you take a glass of wine?'

Did he sleep? Did he dream—that they sat there before him, so beautiful, almost—magnificently—beautiful, both of them, so stiff and formal with the strangely accented English that sounded more like the West Country dialect of nowadays. And the news of home? Of the court...?

'Well enough, sir, well enough.' The young man was impatient, like a fretting horse urgent to get on. His sister threw him a glance of warning and he subsided, curiously acquiescent; it was as though she reproached a sweet-tempered child. The Squire pursued his smooth civilities but he was watching them covertly. 'And the Queen? She grows old.'

'But is in good health; and gracious enough, cousin, to wish my brother well upon his errand.'

And through the outward warmth, the striking of the first chill. 'Her majesty has the advantage over me. I have not so far been made aware—except at second hand—of exactly what my cousin's errand can be.'

Richard, sick with eagerness, leaping to his feet, blurting it out. 'Oh, sir—Isabella has told you? You know that she and I—' His sister over-riding him. 'We come, Sir Edward, that Richard may formally beg the hand of your daughter, Isabella, in marriage.'

'In marriage? Then it is true. It remains only for me to ask,' said the Squire in a voice of ice, 'if you are both in full possession of your senses.'

Richard startled, incredulous. Lenora, dark eyes flashing: 'What could be wrong with such a union?'

'They are close cousins. There can be no marrying between them.'

'Sir, I have seen Isabella—'

'That is nothing to me, boy. My daughter has a suitable alliance arranged for her elsewhere.'

'Arranged? Not arranged by herself!'

'Arranged by her father, sir. That need be enough for you.'

The fine handkerchief of Holland lawn, gripped tight in a hand, very strong, for all it was so white and much be-ringed. 'Sir, she loves me as I love her, we are promised. For God's sake, you would not part us? She could never be happy—'

'An infatuation soon forgotten, romantic nonsense from a fairy tale. Marriage is a serious affair.'

Lenora in rising indignation: 'Cousin Edward, there is nothing lightly romantic about my brother's love for Isabella, nor hers for him. They have made vows, exchanged tokens—'

He interrupted. 'I pay no attention, Madam, to the nonsense practised at your fine court: all this talk of romantic devotion, revolving around your shrivelled old virgin queen. I regret that my sister, despite my objections,

however briefly carried my daughter there. Isabella is long promised—to a fine young man, John Lloyd, my neighbour, whose estate, marching with mine—’

‘Sir, my brother will inherit a fortune ten times more than a few acres of mudland!’

‘That is not the question. There has been too much intermarrying. I adhere to the theory that it may lead to instability of the mind.’

‘I remind you, cousin, that my father himself was a son of first cousins.’

‘Very well—and what is your brother’s reputation at court? Dare-devil Dick do they call him, or some such name—?’

‘He lacks patience, sir, he is without fear. But there is no wrong in him, none. The Queen herself has said it: “My pretty, sweet Diccon is sound as a hazel-nut.” ’

‘Very well: and has added, has she not? that nevertheless it’s as well he has his devoted sister to continue as his—guardian.’

Richard put his hand in automatic gesture to the hilt of his dagger. ‘Sir, my sister is my friend—not my keeper.’

‘I suggest no serious flaw,’ said the Squire, less roughly. ‘But the seeds are there, they are sown in your ancestry. You are a dangerous young man. You are not for my daughter.’

He looked not very dangerous now: his hand had fallen from the dagger hilt and he stood staring, all the bright hope drained from his face, pale as the great pearl swinging at his cheek. He stammered: ‘But we are promised. How can we forget—?’ And now a wild look did come into his eye. ‘I will see her myself, I shall ask her—’

‘Diccon!’ cried Lenora, catching him by the empty sleeve of his jacket.

‘—I shall not leave this place until I have seen her...’

The Squire rose and pulled on a bell-rope. ‘Very well. I had hoped to spare you this. But I see that only the full truth will do.’ To the servant at the door he said, ‘Ask her ladyship to come and to bring my daughter here.’

The mother came to the door, urging forward the girl, white-faced, head hung: very young, very lovely, blue-eyed and with soft, palely golden curling hair; frightened and yet with a faint air of sulky defiance. ‘Oh, Richard! I am sorry, but... Cousin Lenora, don’t look at me like that! I was foolish, Richard cozened me—’

Brother and sister, side by side, stock still, gazed back in utter incredulity. Lenora cried out at last, and now her hand crept to her brother’s wrist in a restraining grasp: ‘You have broken faith with him?’

‘He has coerced her,’ cried Richard. ‘Bullied her!’

‘Better tell the truth, girl,’ said her father. As she remained silent, cowering, he spoke for her. ‘Already there was a firm understanding when she went to the court. There her head was turned by your fashionable nonsense. She came home, moped two days, confessed all to her mother. She is now formally betrothed. But for this sudden descent upon us, you would have been informed and the matter ended.’

They seemed hardly to hear him. Lenora cried out, ‘You have betrayed him!’ and Richard, ‘Isabella, speak to me, tell me in your own words, I’ll believe no other. You repent? It is ended? It was all a—nothingness?’ As she remained silent, his sister burst out again, and with unlovely oaths. Isabella said sullenly, ‘Don’t dare to call me such names!’

‘Names! I’ll call down worse than names upon you! Liar, false betrayer, I’ll call down my curse upon you, I’ll see you shrivel and die—’

‘Come away, Isabella,’ said her mother, trembling at her daughter’s shoulder. To Lenora, standing like a fury in her rage and pain, she cried back: ‘It is you who have been the betrayers—a young, innocent girl, tricked with fair words and false pretences...’

‘For God’s sake! Is this what you have told them, you unclean bitch? That he tricked you, cheated you? He couldn’t trick a child. I’ve told you, the Queen herself had said it, “the heart that knows no guile”. But to excuse yourself to your precious lover here at home, your gross, land-grubbing bumpkin...’

‘Lenora, no, no!’ Richard cried out in pain. ‘Poor innocent—!’

Isabella, dry-eyed, stealing sly glances at her father’s face. ‘Oh, Richard, yes, I was too young and foolish! It was all so seductive, the sighs and pleadings, the dancing in the great hall and the games, the old harridan clapping her speckled hands to see the antics of her pretty Diccon with his latest love—’

‘Isabella, you were my only love. You said I was your only love—’

Her father cut him off short. ‘That will do. She is the one that has done the cozening, boy, and now seeks to excuse herself by betraying you.’ He said to her mother: ‘Take her out of my sight,’ and to the young man, standing there, ashen, white-lipped, staring after the closing door: ‘Why would you press me? You could have placed the fault on me and so kept your illusions. But no, you must insist and now you know all the truth. You are not wanted here, cousin, neither by her parents nor by the girl herself. You have used the right word. It was all a nothingness.’

Did he sleep, did he dream?—the Squire of Aberdar, in the year of 1840, lying back in the great chair, broken,

exhausted, late back from the funeral of his young wife!—dreaming of that hour, here in this very room two hundred and fifty years ago. This room, despite the bright firelight, grown cold and dark as death: oak-panelled, beautiful as a Rembrandt painting with its glow of colour, of satin and velvet, its glimmer of jewels in the flickering of the flames—Lenora, eyes flashing black fury as bright as the jewels themselves. The pretty dagger hung in its sheath at the young man's thigh, a deadly toy which yet must be commonly carried in those perilous days. He put his hand to the hilt, the white hand heavy with rings, diamond and emerald, ruby and pearl. Stammering, stumbling...‘This is your word? We shall never..? We are parted..?’

‘It is *her* word, boy. You heard her for yourself. You had better—’ But the Squire broke off, cried out: ‘Put away that knife!’, and leapt forward trying to wrest it from the upraised hand. He fell back, helpless. ‘Oh, my dear God! Sweet Jesus—!’

An age of high romance in the sway of a virgin queen, of chivalry, of danger, of too-ready death, when a kiss might banish a woman to oblivion, a man to the block—an age when dark spirits were abroad, when the throne itself lent ear to soothsayers and astrologers, when ladies’ maids ran errands for witches’ potions, and waxen images were pierced through with pins to bring about disaster: when life and death were all too often black and secretly contrived... A dream?—of bright blood springing, of velvet dyed to crimson, of the silent drip, drip, drip of red upon the red bows on the red-heeled shoes: of Avenging Fury, crouched like a Pieta with the slender body lying across her knee: ‘A curse upon you! My anathema upon you and all your house, upon all your family down the ages for ever, till the end of time! Your daughter, treacherous bitch that she be, and her

children and her children's children—this death shall be upon them, my curse upon them, they shall never know happiness, never in love nor in marriage....' And as the shuddering man again moved forward, she cradled the dead body close against her breast as though it might ward off further danger. 'Never again! From the very fires of hell, I'll reach out to you and keep this curse alive—in this branch of the Hilbourne family, never again shall there be...

'Never again... Never again...'

A servant came upon the two little girls huddled, crying, outside the closed door. 'Oh, Tomos, Papa fell down! There's somebody in the library, talking to him. But there wasn't anybody in there....'

Nor was there now; only the Squire, lying half insensible across the arm of the carved wooden chair, the fallen glass still dripping its red wine. 'What? Tomos? Yes, yes, I am well enough. I have been asleep, I think. And dreaming.... Dreaming....'

'A nightmare, sir? You look so pale, Sir Edward, your hands are so cold. The poor mistress taken from the house today—you are tired, sir, exhausted: no wonder you should fall asleep and dream bad dreams. But these, sir, you may forget. Dreams need mean nothing, sir; we may forget such dreams.'

'I have forgotten,' said the Squire. But he stared down suddenly at the spilt wine. 'Is that blood?' he said.

CHAPTER 2

TANTE LOUISE WAS A Belgian, from the south, a Walloon—who, however, had married a Frenchman and lived most of her life in France—hideously ugly, with a frog-face and rolling grey-green eyes, yet of so resolute a chic that no one had ever yet recognised her as even plain. Her hair was dyed to an impossible auburn and her coiffure and *maquillage* always just so much ahead of the times—for the propriety in such matters of *ces Anglaises*, she cared not a fig. Her lingerie was exquisite, her outer garments extravagantly smart. How it could have been contrived, why for that matter she should have gone to such trouble for so limited a world of appreciation, who could say?—but in all her years of exile on the quiet old Montgomeryshire estate, she relaxed not a fraction of her vigorous *toilette*. It was typical of Tante Louise that in time for the funeral, she should have achieved the very last word in black bombazine trimmed with the newly fashionable jet, and the tall bonnet with its high white plume. All arranged in advance, perhaps, for just such an event. That also would be typical. Tante Louise was not blessed with a sentimental heart.

In the ensuing months, she left undone nothing that might restore health and vigour to the ailing house. It was not to immure herself in a tomb, she said, that she had left her *appartement* in Paris, *si chic, si bien meublé*; and, unhampered by delicacy or doubt, she scrubbed and swept and polished away the memories of three hundred years, banishing the heavy, dusty carved wood furniture and the ancestral portraits with their long, thin noses and bunched red mouths, and ruthlessly painting over moulded plaster,

scrubbing down panelled oak. Gay carpets were imported, light wall-papers, delicate furniture, all the chic of the elegant Paris of her past. When Sir Edward protested she replied crudely: 'You wish then your daughters to follow in the way of your poor wife in this gloomy place?' and he was silent immediately and for many hours to come. She had no wish to wound; but why trouble with long argument when here was the sure, swift way to victory? He would be thankful in the end; men had to be managed, it was always so.

Meanwhile...

Meanwhile, eyes watched: ears listened. From another world, another life, another—somewhere—eyeless, yet other eyes watched, other lips communicated; mindless yet observed, made judgments: with no future, yet peered forward into the future—and waited. And voiceless, yet whispered.

Brother and sister, voiceless—whispering. One day...

One day, it will be time for us to go back there and haunt again.

One battle Edward Hilbourne won against Tante Louise. 'The nurse is too old and grim, the children must have someone younger and easier, someone kind.'

'You do not suggest, mon cher Edouard, que je ne suis pas gentille vers ces enfants?'

'No, of course not. I'm speaking of who ever has the actual care of them. They need someone not so old-fashioned as this one, not so strict and cold.'

'It is necessary to have a nurse well-trained, one who knows the manners, what is comme il faut. They are mal-

élevées. Their poor mother—'

He interrupted as if he would not hear the words, repudiated them. 'No one's asking you to find some bouncing country girl. It's not in fact a nurse they should have. They are over five years old, they need more lessons, they need a governess.'

A chill doubt entered her heart. A governess—some bright, pretty young woman who would settle in, take over the children, take over the Squire himself—marry him, dispossess her of all that was left to her, now that she had given up her Parisian home and possessions. She determined upon resistance. 'Oh, ho, a fine gouvernante—'

But he interrupted her, unwontedly impatient: 'Louise, please just do as I say. Find a young woman able to instruct them; and dismiss the nurse.'

'Find! Dismiss! Is it for me to have your orders, Edouard? Am I not mistress here, do I not take the place of their mother?'

He looked into the sallow frog face, the prominent grey-green eyes. He said flatly: 'No.' But, after all, who else would even try? 'Nobody can do that,' he said, more gently, 'but I'm grateful to you for being here, Louise, truly grateful. I need you. Only, meanwhile, please do as I say, and find a suitable young person.' He summoned a smile, dragged up from the depths of his desolate heart some shreds of the old, easy Hilbourne charm. He said in his excellent French, 'You are far too intelligent, ma chère, not to know just what I mean. So please help me! Be kind!' It always pleased her to hear her own tongue spoken. After all, he thought, she must be lonely too.

'I will make the advertisement,' said Tante Louise.

So Tetty came—Miss Alys Tetterman, a neat compromise between the two schools of thought.

No atmosphere, indeed, in which to mend a breaking heart. Dear heavens, thought Miss Tetterman, arriving, what a gloomy place! I shall have to get away, I could never bear it here...

Lying in the lap of the low, thickly-wooded hill, with no outlook but across the gravelled drive and terraces (flowerless, but at least green-grassed now, for it was full summer and that poor young wife and mother had been three months dead), to the narrow stream of the Dar which gave the Manor its name, flowing on to feed the great river Severn, many miles away; across the stream and immediately to the up-rising slope of the opposite hill, closing it in. A long, two-storied building, begun as a simple manor house and since much added to—but altered in its early days, so that it had lost nothing of its Tudor characteristic. No stripes of black and white, but built of brick and stone, an ungainly sort of house, stout pillars holding up its heavily-brooding portico, three sets of projecting oriel windows divided into many squares of glass panes, clusters of twisted chimneys rising from the peaked roof, with their turreted chimney-pots. I shan't stay in it, thought Miss Tetterman, I couldn't! I'm here now but I have my precious little hoard of money, I can afford to make a change if I wish. I shall just have to keep a look-out in the advertisements. There must be a more cheerful situation to work in than this...

A man had met her at the railway station who looked very much unlike a mere groom but nevertheless acted as a mere groom, humping up her trunk on to the rear platform of the pony carriage, respectfully handing her in—yet was there not a trace of irony in his servility?—and silently driving her through the country roads and up the long curving, rutted drive. Now he climbed down and held out

his hand as she stepped from the carriage; went forward and jerked briefly on the bell-rope at the heavy old oak front door. Well, I'm in for it now, she thought. Too late to turn back now. But I'm not going to stay...

And out from behind one of the two rounded pillars of the porch a small girl darted forth and, tipping the hooped crinoline till it jutted out like an inverted bowl behind Miss Tetterman's spare figure, clasped her about the waist. Miss Tetterman looked down into eager blue eyes, to pale golden hair softly stirring in a little breeze—and thought that, perhaps after all, she was going to stay.

To the end of her life, this was to be the effect upon all those who came to know her, of Miss Lyneth Hilbourne, now something less than six years old.

From behind the second pillar emerged, less exuberantly, her mirror image. Miss Tetterman saw again that faint stirring of the floss of fair hair and somewhere in the back of her mind noted that in fact the day was utterly still, no breeze blew. But astonishment over-topped hardly recognised mild surprise. 'Goodness gracious! They told me that you were twins, but nobody ever mentioned—'

'We're identikal', said Lyneth. 'Everyone gets quite amazed.'

'She always says idenkital,' said Christine, looking at her sister with a kind of proprietorial pride. 'She likes long words. She's the cleverest.'

'Yes, well, but—'

'I think idenkital is nicer than the right—than the other way,' said Christine quickly.

'How ever am I going to tell you apart?' said Miss Tetterman, duly checked. I shall have to tie a blue ribbon on one of you and a pink on the other.'

'I want the pink ribbon!' cried both little girls, hopping

excitedly, and, 'No, *I* want the pink ribbon,' repeated Lyneth, insistent.

'Oh, Lyn, you know how I like pink—!'

'We will toss up for it,' said Miss Tetterman pacifically.

'No, no, I want it! Christine doesn't really mind.'

'All right. She can have it,' said Christine. She assured Miss Tetterman, 'I don't mind. I don't really like pink *much* better than blue.'

'I shall decide,' said Miss Tetterman—the Tetty of so many years to come; but in the depths of her heart she knew even then, that she would give the pink ribbon to Lyneth. Lyneth who had been the first to run out to welcome her—plain, colourless Alys Tetterman with her scarred, spoilt face, finding herself nowadays unloved, almost entirely unfriended—to welcome her with the all too conquering charm of an innocent outpouring of too facile love.

The door swung open and she took a hand of each child and said, almost gaily: 'Well—had we better not go in?'

And yet—how chill it struck her, entering through that heavy oak door. She felt the man's eyes upon her and turned her head and saw in his deep glance something that seemed like fear.

The narrow entrance that had done well enough for the first squire of Aberdar Manor, had long since been widened out to form a large square hall, overhung like a balcony by the first floor landing. A broad staircase led up from it, heavily carved and in its own way handsome and, here at the heart of the house, to the anxious newcomer somehow solid and reassuring.

She stepped in, the children walking backwards, looking up into her face. She knew that they were looking

at the scar that ran, still hardly healed, from temple to jaw down her left cheek. 'You are looking at my scar,' she said. 'I had an accident some while ago, with a runaway horse.' She added, comfortingly, 'I am used to it now, I forget it. And soon you will, too.' She never forgot it for one moment of her life.

Very thin and by reason of her thinness looking taller than in fact she was; very properly governess-y in her smooth brown crinolined skirt, tight, trim jacket, boots and gloves of black kid, straw bonnet trimmed plainly and yet rather daringly with two bands of velvet ribbon, one brown, one black. A man-servant, opening the door to her, ushered her, with her charges, into the hall. 'You can wait 'ere. I'll tell 'em.' He spoke with a strong Welsh accent, showing no pronounced respect for either the new arrival or her future employers. She stood quietly beneath the heavy mantel overhanging the huge empty grate.

The children seemed fascinated by her, and not only because of the scar. 'Are you going to stay with us?'

'Well, yes, I hope so,' she said.

'Do you like our house?'

'Have *you* got a nice house?'

'Is your house as big as this?'

'Well,' she said again, 'where I come from is a very nice house too, certainly. And, yes, as big as this—even bigger. I'll show you a picture of it some day.'

'Were you the governess there?'

'It was my home,' she said, quietly.

The servant had reappeared, gestured to the open doorway. 'Please to go in,' he said. His tone seemed very subtly to have altered.

The children followed her. At the door she said: 'You had better let me go alone.' A woman's voice said with a

very strong French accent, 'But certainly, children, stay out!' and a man's, quiet but firm, 'Let them stay with us.' She held a hand of each of the little girls as she went into the room.

Through the rest of the house, Tante Louise had been busy, stripping the old oak of the accumulated polish of three hundred years so that now it gleamed with an almost ghostly pallor; cleaning and repainting the ceilings, replacing the heavy old carved tables and chairs with the elegant furniture already being shipped over from her Paris home. But there in the Squire's own library, little in the past two and a half centuries had suffered any change.

Madame had remained seated, stiff and resentful, controlling her secret fears—relieved, however, to some extent by the sight of the terrible disfigurement. As the Squire rose to his feet, she said in her rapid French: 'Well—she warned us in her letters, but one must say, the scar is grotesque. However, who wants a pretty governess? This one at least won't find some neighbouring poor tutor and marry herself off while we still have need of her. And for the rest, she seems quite neat and suitably dressed, *tout à fait comme il faut...*'

Miss Tetterman opened her mouth to say that her preparations for educating the young had not excluded lessons in French, but she closed it again. It would be too embarrassing for the Squire to become aware that she had understood the heartless shrugging off of her life's tragedy. Nor did it occur to Madame, armoured in contempt for all things English, that a poor governess should be so equipped; and since clearly the children would learn the language from their aunt, Sir Edward had given little thought to it. Now since Tante Louise clearly assumed her ignorance and the young lady herself made no denial, he accepted it as a

fact that she spoke none. He hastened, however, to bring to an end so ugly an introduction, saying with a little bow that Madame Devalle was remarking upon Miss Tetterman's charming and agreeable appearance.

'Sir Edouard Heelbourne,' said Madame, performing introductions. 'Father of the cheeldrain.'

Impossible to recognise at first sight—so worn he looked and frail—that he was quite a young man; not much over thirty, perhaps. A tall thin man who might have been handsome but for the air of exhaustion, of pallor, as though at any moment he might drop back into his chair from the sheer weariness of going on living. 'We are happy to see you, Miss Tetterman. It's very good of you to come.'

'Of course she comes,' said Tante Louise. 'She is the governess. Shall she stay away?' She spoke at last directly to Miss Tetterman. '*Moi, je suis Madame Devalle, la tante des enfants, et leur gardienne. Oh, ma foi, je parle comme d'habitude Française!*—I speak in French, Mademoiselle, without thinking. I am saying, I am the guardian of the children now that their mother is dead. So—we have taken big chance to engage without first to see you, but you were not yet enough well to come so far after this—accident,' she gestured towards the scar, 'and you have had good reference from this Sir Charles Arden. You have been long time with this family, you leave only because the young lady have grown too large—?'

Lyneth danced up and down. 'Oh, oh!—did she get very fat? Why couldn't you stay with her just because she got fat?'

'Tais-toi!' said Madame irritably. She resumed. Well, Mees—we have had many applications for this very excellent situation. If you do not suit, then very easily you may be dismiss and we find us another one. This you

understand?’

‘It goes without saying,’ said Sir Edward, ‘and might as well not have been said.’ He made a second small courteous bow. ‘We hope that all will go well and you will be with us until *our* young ladies—’ he smiled at them ‘—have grown too large.’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried the children, clinging to Miss Tettermann’s hands; and, ‘At least I will try,’ said Miss Tettermann.

‘It is an old house,’ said Madame Devalle, as though excusing it. ‘And very—*comment dit-on “sombre”*?’

‘Miss Tettermann has a lovely house,’ said Christine. ‘And much bigger than this. Haven’t you?’

‘Where, before, you were serving?’ suggested Madame Devalle.

‘It was my home, Madame,’ said Miss Tettermann, as she said to the children. She used the French pronunciation of the appellation.

‘Oh, ho! Do you then call “home” the place of your servitude?’

‘I had known it all my life, Madame. I was encouraged to retain my own pride. What you call my servitude shall never be a shame to me.’

‘Nor need be,’ said Sir Edward, ‘in this house.’

‘*Tout de même*, one must not be too proud,’ said Madame Devalle. ‘There will be, of course, the education; but also to put on the children their clothes—’

‘It is not the business of the governess to dress her pupils, Louise.’

‘It’s Bethan that dresses us—’

‘They will soon learn to dress themselves,’ said Miss Tettermann. She smiled down at them. ‘Except for the difficult hooks and eyes at the back. And even then, they

may help one another.'

'—and attend how they are eating their meal.' Balked of any sign of the victim's taking undue offence, she insisted, 'And make clean and tidy their rooms.'

'Is there no nursery-maid, Louise, for goodness sake?'

'If the *gouvernante* is so grand for the work—'

'You referred to my "serving", Madame. I now understand better. But housework is not commonly included in the duties of an instructress.'

'I expressly insisted, Louise, that there should be the usual extra help for the nurseries.'

'I simply examine into the character of Mees,' said Tante Louise, loftily. There was in fact a nursery-maid who would attend to all the duties outlined. 'Bethan washes us and helps us dress,' said Christine again, 'and brings our meals to the nursery. Won't she still?'

'That matter is settled,' said her father, calmly. 'Miss Tettyman understands it all perfectly well—'

'Oh, Papa, her name is Miss Tetterman!'

'I always get names wrong,' he said, smiling at her in his faded way. 'I daresay for all my trying, you will remain Miss Tettyman to the end.' The small, sketched bow again. 'And let us hope that that will be a long way away. We must try to make you happy here.'

There is a magic in the place, she thought. For all it seemed so grim, there is some magic that will keep me here. Now, having lost all that in her twenty-four years she had come to care for, she had not thought to find love and happiness again. But here I am, all in half an hour in love with a pair of welcoming children; and finding it in my heart to find something almost of affection, what you will—for this man!

'It will not be my fault if I am not happy,' she said,

dropping him a small bobbing curtsy in return for the bow, hastily bestowing the same on Madame, and preparing to lead the children away.

‘You Hilbourne men!’ said Madame Devalle in French before the door had closed. ‘You do nothing, you try nothing but within half a minute every female you meet *s’évanouit à vos pieds*.’

‘Then it’s a good thing for them that I meet so few,’ said Edward Hilbourne. Poor pale, thin governess, with her scarred face and clear hazel eyes and that something about her of—gallantry! I don’t think *she* will swoon all that easily, he thought, at my feet or at any man’s.

But let them swoon as they would, as far as he was concerned it would do them no good—and no ill. There would be no more marrying for the Squire of Aberdar.

The man-servant’s name was Tomos, a Welshman from the south, something under forty years old perhaps, of middle height, very dark, rather swarthy indeed, but with a bright and teasing eye: he loved a drink and a laugh and a kiss from a pretty girl and a great deal more if she would give it to him. He returned to the staff quarters with surprising news. ‘Right enough she’d be—but for the scar, right down the side of her face. And thin—thin as a sparrow and dressed like a sparrow too, all brown and a streak here and there of darkness; but the feathers as sleek and flat as if they’d been oiled over, not a fold, not a wrinkle...’

‘A bit on the dull side then?’ suggested the footman, Rod, who had hoped for better things.

‘Well, a sparrow can be bright enough, mind, a nice clean country bird with none of the gloss taken off his feathers from the dusty streets. But that’s her dress. More like a hazel-nut she is herself, *crau collen*, we call them in

Welsh; eyes bright, hair the same colour, very soft and smooth but a little curl creeping out from her bonnet, escaping.'

'Nothing much escapes you, Tomos James,' said Menna, the cook, laughing, 'where a girl is concerned. You've set eyes on her half a minute in all.'

'Aye, but there's more to come. Come from some grand family she has—big man-shun, bigger than this she told the children; and proud as a little peacock. Though like I say, more sparrow than peacock every other way.'

'Tomos, you've been listening at doors again!'

'I like to know what's going on,' said Tomos. He added: 'And so do you all, don't mind pretending!'

They put up little resistance. Not much that was new came their way through the long days of toil that had become a great deal more arduous since the advent of The Walloon as they called her. They had found out Madame's origins and, ignorant of its meaning as simply a native of a southern part of Belgium, found the word comic and used it in a sort of jeering opprobrium. And the change from Nurse, one of themselves, sharing in the life of the servants' hall, to the nursery governess, was meat for curiosity: a creature so far not encountered, a soul in limbo, hung between heaven and hell. 'But the scar, Tomos?'

('She writes that her face is scarred,' the Squire had told them, visiting them in their own quarters for a quiet word. 'A kick from a horse. She thought it right to warn us in advance. Nothing so ugly, she says, as to upset the children, but a long scar down the side of her face.' He had stood there, musing over it, the brave fore-warning of her disfigurement; brave and—pitiful. 'So when she comes, we will all just try to ignore it, seem not particularly to notice it. I know you'll all be kind.')

‘Well, right enough it’s not horrible, just a bad scar. Spoils her looks, but doesn’t—well, alter her expression, like. A great gash it is, running down her cheek. A kick from a horse—yes, that could be it, right enough.’

‘And nice spoken?’

‘Well, quiet. Respectful like. Mind, anyone can play at being respectful; I do it myself, all the time.’

‘Not all the time, my boyo,’ said Menna in Welsh. Menna had been almost thirty years here, rising to be cook and, in the absence of any real mistress in the house, as general manageress. She, like Tomos, came from the sheep-farming mountains of the south. Here on the border, employment of the ‘real’ Welsh was naturally very common.

‘I do it when I must,’ said Tomos, shrugging. ‘Which is more often than I enjoy—not that I grudge it to the Squire. And the sparrow can chirp up a bit quick herself, I can tell you! Old Walloon was having a go, pecking at her. She wasn’t having none of that! “What you call my servitude,” she says. “I’m not ashamed of that.” ’

The housemaid, meanwhile, was escorting the new arrival to her rooms, the house-boy having carried up her small trunk and travelling bag and deposited them beside the bed. ‘I’m to help you unpack, Miss, if you need it,’ said the maid, under instructions but heavy with resentment. She gave a deep, unlovely sniff.

‘No, thank you very much—I can manage for myself quite well.’

‘So I should hope,’ said the girl under her breath, departing. She turned back, however. ‘I was to show you the other rooms.’

Of the two wings added on to the original house, all in a straight line, many years ago now, one was devoted to the nurseries, running the whole length of it along the first

floor, over the fine ballroom, long unused. At present, besides her own, only one bedroom was used, shared by the two little girls; and there was a nursery—smallish, square rooms, panelled half way up the walls to protect the soft, easily damaged paint and plaster of the original Tudor. A third room, however, had now been re-furbished to be used once more as a schoolroom for the new generation—made larger and lighter than the rest by a projecting oriel window—that same window from which the children had watched the departure of their mother's funeral cortege, and seen the beautiful lady and the frightened-looking gentleman.

'They're to take their lessons here. And their meals. You'll take your meals with them,' said the girl, grudgingly: more trays to carry and heavier, more things to lay on the table and clear away and carry downstairs again. The fact that the nursery-maid, Bethan, would perform all this as part of her normal duties, counted with her not at all; self-pity overwhelmed her. 'I bin lying awake all night worrying about it,' she said, her large slightly prominent eyes actually filling with tears. She gave another of her dreadful sniffs.

'I'm so sorry. In what way does it trouble you?'

'If you don't see that for yourself, *I* shan't point it out,' said the girl and walked away. She said over her shoulder, 'They can show you the rest of the arrangements.'

'Don't mind about Olwen, she's always complaining,' said Lyneth. 'Come back to your room and let us unpack for you.'

A blissful half-hour, lifting out the carefully folded things, selecting their places in closets and drawers—disposing of the few personal possessions, where each would look its best: the old-fashioned mahogany writing-desk—'That belonged to my mother; she died when I was a small child'; the ebony workbox inset with its pattern of

mother-of-pearl, by no means in perfect repair; the flowered china ink-stand with its two little pots and the channels for pencils and pens...‘These are all from my old home: my father’s house. My papa was a clergyman. Our home was in the village near Greatoaks Park where I went to work after he died.’

‘Didn’t you have pretty things like these in Greatoaks Park?’

Her mouth lost its easy smile. ‘I left those behind. I can’t carry a great deal about with me and it doesn’t become a governess, anyway, to be surrounded by valuables.’

‘You said you made it like your home. Why did they send you away if they loved you so much?’

And now the scarred face had grown very stiff and cold. ‘You have within yourself great depths of passion, my child,’ her gentle father had said to her, long ago, lying upon his death bed—he who saw so deeply into other hearts. ‘Be on your guard! In love and in unlove you are too intense; and either, unbridled, may bring you to harm. For such passions in man, Alys, may grow up healthy and strong as a fine tree but, the tree being struck by lightning and split all in a flash down the centre, may grow to one side of the riven fork, fresh and sweet and green—to the other dark and dry. Beware, beware, of the lightning flash—and if such should strike you, turn all your heart with quiet deliberation to the fresh green bough...’

A lightning flash had struck her and she had been hard put to force her heart to the freshness of the green bough: was hard put now to reply with gentleness to the innocent questions that recalled the bitterness that had rent the tree of her life in twain. She forced her voice to lightness. ‘Ah, well—things happen, grown-up things. There must be

change. I was happy there and now there is a new start for me—and I will be happy here.’

And she would be happy, she vowed to herself: she would! He would write to her as he had promised (she replying coldly that she would prefer to leave all the past dead), would let her know how things were with him—and with—*her*... And he had given her the ring, the ring that now she wore on a fine chain about her throat. ‘Keep this at least, in remembrance.’ She put up her hand to feel the hard circlet beneath the stuff of her dress, composed her voice to serenity. ‘Oh, darlings, how beautifully you are doing it all!’

She could not help observing with what effortless perfection Lyneth arranged the special treasures, while Christine was content with anxious care to dispose of the neat, dull underwear, the chemises for day and night wear, many petticoats, linen and wool—for a governess would not aspire to the vast, hooped crinolines of the day but must wear the small, neat hoops of wire or simply round out her skirts with a multiplicity of petticoats—the cotton nightgowns with their matching laced-edged caps: she unobtrusively removed and herself stowed away the divided drawers with their bands of solid embroidery just below the knee—the stockings and handkerchiefs. Into the closet went the two warmer dresses for winter, the long cloak and sober velvet bonnet, each in its own sealed muslin bag with sachets of lavender to guard against the moth. The reedy arms struggled with the long poles hooking the wooden hangers on to a rail so high that the skirts of the dresses, drooping without the hoops or petticoats that would round out and shorten them, should not sweep the closet floor.

Lyneth, her task completed, picked up a framed picture. ‘Is this a portrait?’

‘Yes. You can see it was done several years ago. Six

years ago, in fact.'

'Is it your house?'

Tears filled her eyes but she schooled her voice to equanimity. 'It's where I worked as a governess, yes: Greatoaks Park, it's called.'

'Are these all the people, in the group outside the front door? Is this the little girl that got too big?'

'Yes, there she is.' Anticipating further questioning, she slightly hurried over the rest of the likenesses. 'And here's her grandfather, and this pretty lady is her mother, and this is her Uncle George and her Aunt Kitty; and here am I!' She added with deliberation, 'That was before my poor face was scarred.'

'But your face is still pretty on the other side. And are these all the servants? Much more than we've got, we've only got Menna and Olwen and Bethan and Tomos and Rod —'

'—and the laundry-maids and ones that come up from the village—'

'—and Hil,' said Christine, 'and the outdoor people in the stables and everywhere. Only Hil isn't a servant. He's the one that looks after all of them. He looks after everything.'

A man lifting her trunk easily up on to the platform of the pony-carriage, tall, lithe and strong: a man with a deep blue, strangely penetrating glance—waiting upon her with the oddest air of irony in his servility. 'Would that be Hil, who drove me from the railway station?'

'Oh, yes, he's our great friend, our greatest friend in all the world. But I don't know if he likes *you*,' said Lyneth, naively wondering.

'Not like me? He doesn't know me. Why should you suppose that?'

‘He looked sort of afraid,’ said Christine, uncertainly.

She recalled that strange, uneasy glance he had given her as she entered the house: made no denial, asked slowly, ‘But why should he be afraid of *me*?’

‘Well—Hil knows things. He sees things—things that haven’t happened yet.’

‘He doesn’t exactly see them,’ said Christine. ‘But he understands.’ She gave a little shiver as though she suddenly felt a chill.

‘Shall I close the window?’ said the governess, going over to it. ‘You both begin to look cold.’

‘But closing the window wouldn’t be any use,’ said Lyneth, in a matter-of-fact voice. ‘Let’s go on unpacking. We’ll soon be warm again.’

Christine had dealt with everyday woollens but Lyneth must be the one to hang up the soft silver-grey and smooth its folds and fasten it up in its muslin. ‘It’s a lovely dress!’

‘It was a present from... It was given to me—with love,’ she said.

‘But you haven’t got many dresses, have you? Tante Louise has closets and closets full of things.’

‘Your Tante Louise is a well-to-do and fashionable lady. It’s only proper that she should dress accordingly.’

‘Mama had very few dresses; she wore soft muslins and soft silk dressing-gowns most of the time, so that the boning and lacing wouldn’t hurt her.’

‘Long ago, when she used to come downstairs and see people,’ said Lyneth, ‘she wore grand dresses then. But she got too tired. She never came down in the end.’

‘She was ill, your poor Mama.’

‘Hil says she wasn’t ill—not exactly. She was... He said she only wanted to escape to where she belonged.’

‘She belonged where people go when they die,’ said

Christine. 'But Hil says other people wouldn't understand that.'

And yet, I think I do understand, thought Miss Tetterman. She herself had been near to death in the incident that had torn the scar across her cheek, and something of that other world that then had come so close, seemed still to cling about her. She had known then, that where she was going was where she—belonged. And though in the end she had not gone there, still that otherness, that other belonging, seemed sometimes very close to her. She said gently: 'Is not Hil—well, in your father's employ? I think perhaps you should not attend too much to what—what people say who don't know a great deal about the—facts.'

'Hil doesn't deal in facts,' said Christine, evidently quoting. 'Hil is different.'

To Miss Tetterman also, he had seemed indeed a little 'different'. Thirty perhaps?—difficult to guess his age exactly. A red-gold blond with deep blue eyes and an odd air of remoteness, almost of disdain. His name she was to learn later, was James Hill, but he was known universally by his surname only and then without the second T. He appeared to be, under the Squire and without any particular title, in overall charge of the estates, gardens, fisheries and, beyond those, the home farm and the affairs of the tenant farmers. He lived alone in a house on the brow of the hill and mixed only as a superior with the indoor staff. The little girls adored him in their confiding way; he spoke to them always as if they were grown-up—though so far uninformed—young women. It was typical of Hil, she was to discover, that he should confide to the children that their mother had died of no illness but the wish to go to the other world where she 'belonged'.

But...‘Why should he not like me? He hardly knows me. Why should he be afraid *of me*?’

‘Hil knows things: he sees things that haven’t happened yet,’ the child had said.

Meanwhile...

Meanwhile, in the parlour below, Tante Louise was saying, with one of her deprecating Gallic shrugs, ‘Alors—she will do, I suppose. We have heard from this Sir Charles at Greatoaks Park—a Park, that is a good address, yes?’

‘Everything about her former post seems to have been unexceptionable. And I think she is the same.’

‘—that she knows the work of institutrice. She is dressed *comme il faut*—indeed, she has quite good taste, this black ribbon together with the brown on her bonnet, that is *assez chic*—but I daresay passed down from some other hand. A little quick to rise up the temper and speak-back, but that can be cured—’

‘She refused, perfectly properly, to be treated as a servant. I must ask you, Louise, not to behave to her as if she were one, nor to speak to her as one. The servants are well-treated here and happy and they know their place. I hope she will be the same: but she also knows hers.’

‘You make them too much favours, *mon cher*. Well, *n’importe*. She is sufficiently presentable; now that she is here, she may take the girls to meeting other children of the environs. For me, this is *effrayant*, *le* afternoon tea with these English women, so—borreeng. But the children must meet others—they see now none but this boy, Lawrence, from Plas Dar, and now and again their cousin, Arthur Hilbourne.’

‘Well, in fact, those acquaintances soon must cease. They are too old to have boys for friends.’

‘My dear Edouard! You English, positively you make me the shock! Such thoughts are not decent; the little girls are not yet six, the boys perhaps eight or nine years old.’

‘I am thinking of the future, Louise.’

‘But here is what I say. They must in the future know young people, they must meet young men, how else must we find for them good marriages?’

His pale face grew grey, he sat up very straight, angry, resolute, almost—frightening. He said: ‘I have spoken to you about this, Louise, already. The children are not to be taken about to other houses.’

‘They must meet young people.’

‘And I have said that they must not.’

She was horrified; on behalf of these two pretty little girls, genuinely indignant. They must go out, she thought, they can’t be kept in solitude. But she had already found him on this subject, obdurately unreasonable. She played her trump card. ‘If I am to remain here—’

‘I hope you will remain here. I pray that you will and especially now that we have found this excellent young woman to be a friend and companion to them, under your charge. But in all matters of importance regarding my children, I will have my own way.’

‘Your own way is ridiculous, Edouard. It is wrong; absolutely, it is wrong. And while I am the mistress of this house—’

‘I still remain its master,’ he said, and rose and, walking stiffly, almost blindly, went out of the room, and left her there.

She sat for a long time, alone, staring into the empty grate. For this! she thought. For this—to be once again a sort of *femme de charge*, a sort of upper servant, no trust, no

responsibility—for this have I come so far, made so great a sacrifice? For this?

Not so very great, in fact. Unregretfully widowed, she had found herself on the death of a profligate husband, decidedly less well-off than she might have hoped to be and, childless and with no one to care very much about her, it had suited her well enough to accept the financially generous offer of a distant relative, similarly at a loss. But it had all turned out not so well as she had expected, the place was gloomy and depressing to the Parisian *habituée* and her heart pined for the broad boulevards, for gravelled paths with orderly beds of small, sappy pink begonias, hedged in with box; for the pavement cafés and the marble-topped tables, the bitter black coffee dripping through into thick white china cups. Ah well, she thought—it is my duty! And... To be needed, though she might not consciously recognise the fact, was a necessity to all but the most self-centred of women; and she was needed here. And the little girls with their unquestioning out-pouring of affection were something of a revelation to her: so pretty, such charm, such—possibilities—of growing up to be trained and groomed and tricked-out with pretty clothes, to become the belles of the neighbourhood, make the right marriages, her creations and her pride. Meanwhile—so sweet with their pretty little caresses, their confidential ways. But again, as to that...

As to that, how very indiscriminately they bestowed their devotion! She had not quite cared for the way they had hung upon the new arrival, holding her hands as though they had known her for years, been blessed by her kindness and bounty. As they'd left the room with her, Christine had properly enough taken the governess's hand; but how Lyneth had clung, skipping along beside her,

looking up into her face! She did not recognise within herself a pang of something very much like jealousy, but... I shall have to instruct Mees to be less—demonstrative—with the child, she thought.

Even in the chilly heart of Tante Louise, Lyneth's innocent wiles were having their accustomed way.

And evening came and in the night-nursery the two little girls lay curled up close together in the big four-poster double bed. 'Isn't she nice, Christine?'

'Oh, she is, she's nice, much nicer than Nurse.'

'Nurse was nice too.'

'She spoilt you, that's why you liked her such a lot. Even Mama used to say that Nurse spoilt you.'

'She liked me better than you.'

'Everyone does,' said Christine. 'You're more—sort of *light* than I am. Tante Louise says I am such a dull child. Tro serriurse, she says. That means I'm dull.'

'You're not dull, Christine, you're lovely and nice, everyone loves you.'

'Well, we're the children so of course everyone has to love us. But everyone loves me a little bit less than you. You're prettier than me.'

'How can I be?—we're ezackly the same.'

'My hair isn't so curly.'

'That's only because Nurse used to curl mine up more than yours.'

'Because she liked you more than me.'

'How can anybody like me more than you?' said Lyn. 'We're idenkital, they can't tell the difference. "Ezactymom la mame, c'est formidable," Tante Louise keeps saying; but that only means that we look ezackly the same.'

'It's the espression,' said Christine, quoting. "Zee uzzer

child have more life in ze face, boco ploo despreë.” ’ She spoke without a trace of resentment, it was a fact of life. ‘You’ll always be a little bit better than me, Lyn, Miss Tettermann thinks you are already.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Lyneth, ‘how can she possibly? She hasn’t had time to get to like me best.’

‘But you’re the one that got the pink ribbon,’ said Christine. ‘Aren’t you?’

You said you didn’t mind, you said you’d just as soon have the blue.’

‘Yes, but she knew I wouldn’t just as soon. She likes you best. *I* don’t mind, Lyn, I think you *are* the best.’ She said after a pause: ‘Lyneth, did you—feel that the hands were here today?’

‘A little bit. Just a brush of them, like grown-ups pass their hands over your hair. When Hil helped Miss Tettermann down from the pony-carriage. It was only because Hil was there.’

‘Hil says there are no hands. He says we imagine them touching us, sometimes. But they do: it’s like soft feathers—’

‘Yes, soft. But cold—a little bit frightening. Other people don’t know about the hands brushing against us out of the darkness—’

‘Not only in the darkness.’

‘No, I mean *out* of the darkness—out of a darkness: somewhere we don’t know about. But Hil says—’

‘I don’t see how we can just imagine them, when we both feel them at the same time, without saying anything to each other. And I don’t think Hil does believe that we imagine them. I think he sometimes feels them too.’

‘Not the hands. Only the cold, sometimes when he’s here, at Aberdar. We never seem to feel the cold outside. But I think in the porch today, he felt the coldness. And—I

think Miss Tetterman a tiny weeny bit felt it too.'

'I do think she's nice. I love her.'

'So do I. And I love Hil too. Do we still love Tante Louise?'

'Oh, yes,' said Christine. 'We have to. I think she's sad, really, and lonely. We have to love her. I don't think we need like her, if we can't manage that. But that's different.'

'I love Miss Tetterman *and* I like her. And I love Papa and I love Hil: and the other people I love too, Tomos and Menna and all the servants; but not like Miss Tetterman and Papa and Hil.'

'I love Hil,' said Lyneth. The drowsy voice faded away into murmuring. 'And I love Miss Tetterman...'

'But do you think Hil likes her?' said the other drowsy voice. There came no reply out of the darkness. The children slept.

CHAPTER 3

WELL, YES, THE INVALUABLE Miss Tetterman knew how to ride a horse and despite the injury inflicted by her accident some months earlier, seemed content to try again. So a search was made for suitable mounts and on the children's joint birthday, a day when the summer greens were making way for the greys and sepias, the umber and gold of autumn, two fine little ponies were led out into the stable yard, Hil walking between them. Shrill cries of excitement and joy, and immediately: 'I want the white one!' 'No! *I* want the white one!'

'Now, now, children, you can't both have the white one! And look how pretty the other is, as black as jet with his lovely black mane and tail!'

'Oh, yes, he's sweet, he's lovely. Only, Tetty, I like the white one best. Christine can have the beautiful black one.'

'We had better toss up, which shall have which,' said Miss Tetterman, ready to resort as ever to a small trickery which she hardly acknowledged even to herself. Lyneth wanted what she wanted with so much greater an urgency than her sister ever showed; and even now Christine was saying, automatically, 'All right, Lyn, you can have the white one. *I love* the black one too.'

'No, no, that's wrong, Christine. We will toss up for it. Lyneth, you must learn not to be selfish, my dear.'

'Oh, Tetty, please, please, I do want the white one more than she does! She *says* she doesn't mind.'

'Of course she minds, Lyn,' said Hil. 'She's a foolish child, because the black is a much better pony, look how proudly he holds his head and lifts his pretty little hooves.'

But the silly girl doesn't want him.' He said off-handedly, 'His name is Ebony.'

'Oh, yes, he is pretty, he is sweet, and Ebony, what a lovely name! All right, Christine, you can have the white one if you really want to...'

'The white one is called Ivory,' said Hil.

Christine looked on in an agony of indecision. 'I'd sort of... When I said I'd have the black one, I felt he—belonged to me. So, now...'

'He couldn't belong to you all in a quarter of a minute.'

'He did,' said Christine. Blue eyes filled with tears. The sacrifice made—what had been second-best had become immediately her own, to the depths of her faithful heart.

'This is spoiling the day,' said Miss Tetterman over their heads, to Hil. 'Before it's even begun, they're spoiling their day.'

'It's you who are spoiling it,' he said, low-voiced. 'You want your favourite to have what she wants—like all the rest of them. Lyneth, it's always Lyneth, with everyone.' He put out his hand to Christine. 'Come here, my flower! Lyneth, stay back with Miss Tetterman. Christine, come and pat the ponies, stroke their noses—aren't they soft and pink? Now, which do you really want for your own? Never mind for the moment which Lyneth wants—whisper to me which you'd really like if Lyneth wasn't here.'

Christine stood with one hand in his, the other slightly, nervously caressing the two pretty creatures. She reached up at last and he bent so that she could whisper into his ear. He straightened himself. 'Well, there we are, then. You both get your way. Because from the beginning Lyneth wanted Ivory and now she can have him; and Christine loves Ebony and she can have *him*. What a good thing it's all turned out exactly right.' He called Lyneth over—'Come, sweetheart!'

and took her little hands and put one close to the bit and the other on the rein of the white pony and with Christine did the same for the black. 'Now, lead them about and get to know them. Just walk them round, you'll be perfectly safe with them, they're beginning to love you already. Make friends with them and then they won't mind letting you ride them.' He jerked his head towards a rough bench between two stable doors. Miss Tetterman, a little bemused, went obediently and sat down there beside him. 'We'll leave them to it,' he said.

'Hil, truly you managed that marvellously.' She found herself saying, half apologetically, '*You* don't have favourites.'

'Oh, but I do,' said Hil. 'Only I choose with a little more percipience than most. And I try to show no difference. A pity others don't.'

You are a strange man, she thought, to be no more than a factotem here. And he was so—well, really, it seemed an odd thing to say about a man but was he not almost—beautiful? Slender, but straight and well-built and with that challenging deep blue glance of his. She turned away her eyes, almost embarrassed as she saw how the autumn sun lighted the golden hairs on his strong brown fore-arms. And a strange conversation to be having with a mere—servant, only that he seemed entirely unaware of any difference in station.

She felt herself in some doubt. Was it right that he should be so speaking of them, these two little girls, petting them, calling them by sweet names, practically taking their charge out of her hands? She had often wondered whether she would not speak a quiet word to their father about it. Not to Tante Louise; in her difficulties, she never if she could help it had recourse to The Walloon.

Meanwhile...‘You really love them, don’t you?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said quietly. ‘Everybody loves them. Everybody must—they’re so trusting and confiding, so absolutely sweet. But it’s true that I love them more deeply than that; in a different sort of way.’

She said: ‘Differently?’

‘I am so desperately afraid for them,’ he said.

Afraid for them. It was strange that she should not feel more astonished, be more taken aback. Have I too felt, unrecognised, some same glimmering of this? she thought. From that first moment that I entered the house with them? And she recalled the faint stirrings of their flossy golden curls as though a breeze had blown them, though there had been no breeze a-blow. And she, herself...

He said: ‘Why do you touch your face like that?’

‘It’s nothing,’ she said. ‘A—memory. As though a little breeze, a chill breeze, blew against my cheek. I have felt that sensation once before. And felt the cold.’

‘When you first set eyes upon these children. And upon this old house. I think that at that moment you felt some kind of fear?’

She recollected. ‘And you too?’ she said. ‘The children say—they say that you were afraid. Afraid of *me*?’

He turned away his head and made no reply.

CHAPTER 4

TO ARRANGE A WORD of private consultation with the Squire was no easy matter. Madame watched like a hawk over the comings and goings of Mees. That, having given his undertaking, Sir Edward would ever dislodge Tante Louise from the home he had offered her, should have been to her unthinkable; but life had taught the poor woman some bitter lessons and there was little room in her heart for simple trust. In any event, she had no wish to remain there as second fiddle to a new wife, and he seemed less repelled than she herself was, or at any rate professed to be, by the terrible scar. Moreover, all her life unloved and unloving, she was too realistic not to recognise herself as also unlovable. She knew that, dazed by the imminent death of his wife after years of whatever strange difficulties there had been, he had reached out blindly for succour and lit upon herself, perhaps *faute de mieux*, but at any rate without very much investigation; and had found his choice to have been an unhappy one. But by then, the poor Anne had died and it had been too late.

An odd business: it had all been a very odd business, thought Tante Louise. No diagnosis of the poor young woman's malady had ever been advanced, she had been nursed by two old and devoted servants who had proved remarkably tight-lipped as to all that concerned their charge and, the moment it was over, disappeared into retirement. Other servants meanwhile had supplanted the old and by the time she, Madame Devalle, had appeared upon the scene, almost all the staff were new, the sickroom closed to all but immediate attendants, no information whatsoever

forthcoming. That the lady of the house had been—well, funny like—had for some years kept largely to her own apartments and there at last had languished into premature death, was as much as her most searching enquiries could elicit. Always sweet and kind—and so pretty, the children just like her, but she'd been odd, not a doubt of it, shut away more and more in her own rooms and talking to herself—you could hear her now and again through the door, not raving or any of that, just chatting away, laughing sometimes, as you might to anyone. But there had been no one in there.

And then they'd heard she'd died and the nurses had gone and everyone else except Tomos and Menna, the cook; but Menna had been with the family from a girl, she'd never give anything away, nor Tomos either. Edward Hilbourne was adamant in refusing any discussion of his wife's condition or of allowing her name to be mentioned in the presence of the little girls, he had taken upon himself the task of all such explanation and comfort as they received at her death. Not that they could have been personally deeply affected: brief visits, supervised by himself, had been all that within Tante Louise's experience, they had been permitted.

So Madame had had to be satisfied with that, and now kept a wary eye upon the upstart governess; nor did she lose any opportunity of a subtle belittling. 'Certainly she is well enough, Edouard, with the children.' (A little too much so, in fact. Though Lyneth, in sufficiently innocent self-interest, might keep up what by now was largely a pretence of loving Tante Louise, Christine was too totally honest to do more than recognise that one must try to; and it was irksome to see how they hung about Mees, doting upon every word she spoke, all the fun and laughter she created for them.) 'For

myself, *mon cher*, I do not put so much trust in her. She has behind her some—mystery; well, *enfin*—something of mysterious. She receives letters—’ She conversed with him about equally in English and French. That she should practise more fluency in the language of her new home was self-evident.

‘She has a family. Anyone may receive letters.’

‘Yes, but—what becomes of these letters? She well hides them or at once they are destroyed. That is not curious?’

‘How do you know this?’

‘It is the duty, my dear Edouard, to guard carefully over the institutrice of these young children.’

‘For heaven’s sake—not to the extent of enquiring into her private correspondence?’

‘But—there is a ring, also, *mon cher*. With small stones, but the diamond is real and a ruby also and an emerald. Then only un grenat—’

‘A garnet. And I daresay an aquamarine?—it must be a “regard” ring,’ said Sir Edward, incautiously. ‘The jewels spell out the word r-e-g-a-r-d.’

‘Regard? To look?’

‘To think well of. To care for.’

‘Perhaps to love? This is a new possession; I think not yet much worn.’

He looked at her suddenly curious. ‘You must have examined into this very closely? I’ve never seen her wear a ring. How do you know of it?’ And his brow grew dark. ‘I won’t have you, Louise, intruding into Miss Tettyman’s room. She comes to us with excellent recommendations—’

‘From a man. Written to us by a man,’ said Madame. ‘Signed Charles B. Arden.’

‘Because Lady Arden was too unwell to write herself.

Now, once and for all—there is nothing whatsoever to suggest that she is not a perfectly proper and well-conducted young lady and always has been. She came to us more or less directly after being employed from a young age in the Arden family. Whatever her past, it has clearly been blameless. Leave her alone.’

‘Oh, certainly, my dear,’ said Tante Louise. ‘An angel of virtue no doubt, and as you say, straight from the employment of Sir Charles Arden. I have look him in the book. Sir Charles Bell Arden. The father of her pupil. It is in the book!’

Engraved on the inside of the ring—three tiny letters. C.B.A.

Fortunately, Tante Louise, could not ride a horse and Miss Tettermann, as has been said, despite the scar, had professed herself able and willing to do so. To the undisguised astonishment of Madame, a well-fitting habit was produced and, mounted on a neat little bay cob, Mees would trot out with the children, Hil in easy familiarity accompanying them, and the inevitable scatter of little white dogs. And a day came when Sir Edward on his own beautiful Royalist, meeting them on the hillside path across the stream from the Manor, settled himself down to ride alongside them. Hil with a word dismissed himself. ‘If you’ll take charge, then, Squire, I could be seeing about those cattle in the third meadow.’

‘I wish you would, Hil; it would save me a wearisome ride.’

‘Owain will take the horses then, when you return.’ Hil, she had observed, never touched his cap to the master or called him Sir; it was always just ‘Squire’ and a little jerking half-bow as though to say, ‘You and I very well know my

situation here.'

Now seemed a God-given opportunity to mention her misgivings regarding Hil's familiarity with the little girls. 'You go on ahead,' said Miss Tettermann to her charges, 'and see who will reach the fallen log first. Only mind!—no more than a canter, or the winning won't count.' To their father she said, fishing for an opening: 'Hil must be a great help to you, sir, on the estate?'

'I couldn't manage without him. My father died when I was a child. When I came of an age to manage my own estates, Hil came to me and he helped me with it then as he helps me now. But the time seems to have come when I need more than that. I seem not able to do any of it. At my age! I am still a young man!' He mused over it. 'Over three hundred years of tenure—directly down through my branch of the family alone. Can you think what that must mean to a man? To say that I love it—well, that is to say nothing: it is a part of me, part of my blood and my bones, it's at my very heart.' He had reined in his horse and together they sat their saddles, looking out over the manor house and the lands that stretched for a thousand acres beyond it. 'If I could be translated into this great estate, Miss Tettyman there would I be! Spread out before you, across the stream bricks and mortar for my bones and for my flesh and my blood the woods and the meadow-land, the little river, the wheatfields and cornfields and springs and wells; and the very beasts that graze the green grass and the men that work there and through generations of their families have worked for generations of mine. All part of me! All part of the Hilbourne family, all part of *me*!' He stood up in his stirrups gazing out over it all, with uplifted head, grey eyes brilliant—for a brief moment handsome and strong and eager, and young again; and let his shoulders droop and sat back

slackly in the saddle and, moving slowly onward up the slope, said hopelessly: 'And already I feel it too great a burden, trying to care for it.'

Seen from this spot, the extent of the manor and its demesne indeed was vast. Into the steeper slope of the opposite hillside, it was as though a giant hand had scooped out an arc, into which had been folded the straight, blunt line of the house itself. To either side of it, hidden from view by banks and trees, strung along the length of the stream were its out-buildings. To its right, the domestic offices, the bakehouse, the laundries, the dairies, and so on to the garden sheds and stores, the glassed green-houses and the big, square, walled kitchen garden; to the left, the stable yard exactly balancing it and, between yard and house, the kennels, the tack rooms, the coach house, the smithy.

Beyond these again, curving the slope of the hill, the coachman's lodge and so on to the Home Farm, with its storehouses, hay barns and byres—all running in their orderly pattern for perhaps a quarter of a mile along the twisting river bank. And beyond the hill-top, the endless acres of field and meadow, woodland and forest, dotted about with the tenant farms, the cottage homes of the workers. On the brow of the hill stood one larger than the rest, two cottages thrown together, considerably enlarged and embellished. The Squire pointed it out: 'I daresay you have noticed it? Hil lives there.' He said again: 'God knows how I should manage if he were not with me!'

It brought her back to the subject of her anxieties. 'I'm sure, sir, he is the most loyal and reliable of servants. It's only—'

'Hil is more than a servant,' he said. He repeated it with a note of—almost of pride?—in his voice. 'More than a servant. Hil is not a servant at Aberdar Manor.'

It was early December now: the light snowfall had ridged the bare branches meeting above their heads and crisped the curling rims of the fallen leaves. The path sloped gently up through the woods, opening at last into a little glade where the children had reined in their ponies and were amicably squabbling as to which first had reached the log, and there dismounted and stood again, all four of them now, looking across to where the old house lay so dark and bleak against the snow-bright hollowing-out of the hill. She saw how for a moment the children looked startled and clapped together their little gloved hands against the cold. It was indeed very cold up here. She felt it herself... So *cold*...

Just here—here on this spot, on a day far, far into the future, a woman would stand, erect, severe, in her brown stuff dress with its smoothly rounded bustle, watching in anxious disapproval as a girl took her lover's hand and said, 'Only a born Hilbourne could understand. And so I must explain to him, Tetty, and show him the house.'

'There is no house now,' she would reply; and with her company of little prancing white dogs, walk stiffly away.

Just here, on this very spot.

And now, also, she was anxious. The children were hitching their ponies to low branches, in earnest conformation with the teachings of beloved Hil, and setting the little dogs to hopping back and forth over the log, 'Look Tetty, look Papa—a circus, a circus!' She said: 'Sir Edward, while I have the opportunity, there's something that for a long time I've wanted to ask you. Hil—he is so very fond of the children, he plays with them, pets them, calls them by pretty names. May I ask you—you know how clinging and demonstrative

they are—is it your wish that they should continue with him in this degree of—familiarity?’

‘With Hil?’ he said, almost as though taken aback; suddenly frowning.

‘I suggest nothing wrong, sir, God forbid, I myself have never seen any—well, harm in it. But they are babies no longer and one day will be children no longer—’

He broke out sharply: ‘Don’t speak to me of that!’—and immediately retracted in his courteous way. ‘I beg your pardon. I don’t mean to be abrupt. I—well, it’s just that for a father it’s difficult to envisage his little ones—changing. But Hil—’

‘I make no criticism, Sir Edward. But I’m sure you will think it proper of me to have consulted you? I think,’ she suggested hesitantly, ‘that, for example, with any other male member of-the staff—’

‘Hil is not a member of the staff; or at any rate,’ he said again, ‘not in the sense of being a servant. He is different from the rest.’

‘He is, sir, yes; I respect him very much, he seems to me to be a wonderful person.’ (Yes, indeed!—with that heavily curling red-gold hair and the deep blue eyes. His mouth took a little quirk to it, when he was—as he so often was by the children—delighted and amused.) She checked herself hastily, the fair cheek, unscarred, took on a faint uprise of colour.

He glanced at her curiously. ‘And so—?’

She had never asked—or daring to hint a question, never received any answer—what Hil had meant by that strange declaration as to the children, ‘I’m so desperately afraid for them.’ And yet surely it was important for her to know? She ventured: ‘And so, all I say is—it is with your consent that I continue to allow total freedom between

himself and the little girls? For my part, I'm very glad that it should be so. I know that he is devoted to them—deeply devoted.' She was scared to speak out, and yet... 'Sir Edward, will you forgive me if I ask you, only for the children's sake—why should Hil feel so—anxious about them? Afraid for them?'

For a moment she thought that he would faint; his pale face took on a look of ashy grey, he put out a hand to an overhanging bough to steady himself. It seemed a huge effort for him to speak. He said at last: 'Afraid for them?'

'He has said as much, sir. I thought that it would be right for me to understand.'

'Only a Hilbourne can understand,' he said. He seemed to speak only to himself. 'We are people apart. We are cursed.' And he looked down at the heavy, dark line of the ancient manor house in the shadow of the hill. 'We must leave this place,' he said. 'Three hundred years of it—but what does it all matter?—I must leave it, take them away. Three hundred years, yes—but every hour of it cursed: for two hundred and fifty of those years one generation after another fallen to disaster. Have we all been mad that we've lived with it, down through the ages, never moved away?' He seemed to become aware of her, almost blindly reached out and caught at her gloved hand. 'You must stay with us! Stay with them, stay with me, we need you, for God's sake don't leave me alone again with this terrible fear. But we'll go away somewhere, we'll leave Aberdar. I've been mad not to think of it before.' And he raised the small gloved hand and held it for a moment against his pale cheek, and as she drew it gently away, released it with a little bow as though he relinquished with gratitude a blessing given and received. 'You are very sweet and good, Miss Tettyman,' he said. 'Truly good and kind. Between us, we will guard these

little ones. For the rest—accept it all from me, don't try to understand.' He repeated: 'Only one born a Hilbourne can understand.'

Here on this very spot, thirty years from now—that young girl was to speak those self same words to her.

CHAPTER 5

THE MANOR HOUSE OF Aberdar was perhaps four hundred years old and had been in the same hands for as long. During the first century, it retained much of its original simplicity but by 1540 King Henry VIII was grown fat and imperious and well into his monstrous stride and, with the dissolution of the monasteries, was bestowing right and left among his friends, rich gifts of the plundered lands. The Hilbourne family, small land-owners in the northerly marches of Wales had fought against Richard in the war that had brought Henry Tudor to the throne of England. Three in particular had been with him at Bosworth Field and now from his son, 'Great Harry', their sons reaped their rewards—John and Henry Hilbourne, brothers, and Edward, their cousin—whose descendants, three hundred years later, still kept to the old family names.

Edward, Squire of the modest manor of Aberdar, had been content to remain where he was, simply selling off his share and with the proceeds extending his house and enormously adding to the estate. Henry, the elder of the brothers tore down the old Abbey buildings and with their ancient stones, re-built in reckless magnificence; John, the younger, created for himself a sprawling mansion, half-timbered, all white and black with narrow windows, criss-crossed into little diamond panes—to have it replaced by his heirs two hundred years later, by a new Hilbourne Hall in all the light and charm of Georgian grace.

It was to this house that, on a winter's day, Sir Edward Hilbourne came, his cousin's carriage-horses breasting the steep incline from the railway station; and, looking up at

the lovely Palladian pillars of the portico, felt his heart sink. For he saw that his mission had been ridiculous. It would all be in vain.

Henry, the elder brother, had arrived ahead of him from his Abbey home, together with Catherine his wife. The two sisters-in-law greeted their cousin somewhat warily; he was considered in the family to be a strange and difficult man. No wonder that his poor wife... Though for that matter, perhaps it was on account of her own peculiarities that he had been driven in upon himself? Well, well, as to all that—their husbands had instructed them, the less said the better. He was offered refreshment; with gracious inclinations of their charming heads, the ladies withdrew. Murmured confidences accompanied their departure. ‘Still no indication as to why he comes!’

‘Nor of why he wished me to be present—to be at home, at any rate. John could make no head nor tail of it: that was why he asked you and Henry to come over and join us, to see what was in the wind.’

‘My dear Maria, he gets odder every day.’ They settled themselves comfortably in Maria’s boudoir, for a chat. ‘How old and frail he looks! It’s hard to remember that Edward is the youngest of the three. I think he can’t be much more than thirty years of age?’

‘I suppose he may yet marry again?’

‘We wondered about that when he imported the foreigner.’

‘Not after you’d seen her? But there’s still the governess, Catherine. More unlikely things have happened.’

‘Oh, my dear, the poor thing! I saw her when last we stayed with Sir Thomas and Lady Jones at Plas Dar. Fair enough once, perhaps, but this terrible scar! And anyway, after Edward’s experience with poor Anne—’

‘Is it true that he wants your boys to discontinue visiting the Manor?’

‘Edward considers that the girls are “too old to receive boy playmates”. What on earth does he fear?’ said Catherine, as Tante Louise had asked before her. ‘Arthur’s not yet nine years old, and the little ones, five and three.’

‘Well, well, there are other nice, pretty little girls in the world—and will be nice pretty big girls too, for later on. And with such an heredity on their mother’s side—I don’t know that I should struggle too hard against the ban on their meeting their cousins.’

‘And in fact Arthur goes anyway,’ said Catherine shrugging. ‘He spends half his holidays with his friend, Lawrence, at Plas Dar and I’m sure they’re always hopping across the stream on secret assignations. The more they’re forbidden... Eventually, no doubt, it will have to be discouraged as you say, but his father will speak to him one day, all in good time. Meanwhile, about Edward... Why don’t we—?’ They stole back, stifling naughty giggles, to the sitting-room door.

At home at the Manor, Edward Hilbourne’s own rooms had been left with their splendid oak panelling and solid carved tables and chairs; but most of the rest had been transformed by Tante Louise into a sort of mock-Georgian, much painted and plastered, with bright wall-papers and hangings and the sort of furniture with which he was confronted now. Charmingly pretty, certainly, but so spindly and uncomfortable! And yet it was to this... Well, it was for his children’s sake and he must persevere. He sat upright, thin, pale, faded, a very wraith of a man in his sober grey suit, old-fashioned frock coat over the narrow grey trousers and pearly waistcoat, in contrast with his cousins’ bright, jolly

checks and plaids. 'Well, Edward, you look like a wisp of smoke these days, as if any puff of wind could blow you where it would. So what wind blows you here?'

'You will think it a very strange one,' said Edward. 'And now that I've come, I recognise that it blows in vain.' He looked round the lovely room with its high ceiling, so much in contrast to those low, heavy rooms at home. 'I was wondering, John, if you would consider exchanging estates with me.'

'Exchange estates?'

'It's a fair enough offer. My lands are far wider than yours and more yielding.'

'Then why—?'

'Our cousin—whatever she is, some vague relative to all of us—*enfin*, Madame Devalle, she doesn't like the Manor, it's too old for her and too—'

'—gloomy?'

'Well, gloomy. But it needn't be gloomy, that's only because—'

'It has been a sad house for you, Edward, we understand that.'

'And for the children. I'd prefer something for them more light and airy, a situation like this up on top of a hill —'

'Unfortunately, I—and I think Maria—prefer it too.'

'I've said already,' said his cousin, 'that now I am here I realise it was only a dream.'

John rose and poured sherry into elegant small glasses. 'I'm sorry, my dear fellow, not to accommodate you. I daresay... But Maria would never consider it.'

'That was the reason I asked for her to remain at home for my visit; I knew she would have to be consulted. But I see now that it was all unthinkable. I have just been foolish.'

In one's solitude,' said Edward Hilbourne, 'and with many—
anxieties—one loses a little of one's sense of reality. Think
no more of it.'

Henry lay back in his chair, wriggling a little as the fine
carved back cut across his heavy shoulders. 'But just a little
longer let us think of it. Your Belgian Madame, Edward,
objects to your house? Is she so dear to you, cousin, that
you sacrifice all to her?'

'She's not dear to me at all,' said the Squire, with his
wan half-smile. 'But infinitely precious. We have this
excellent governess now, perfection with the children. I
daren't lose her. But she's a young woman, she can't remain
in the place without some sort of chaperone; and who else
shall I get to act the dragon but Louise Devalle?'

'No one, certainly, could look the part more,' said John,
laughing.

'So I must cling to her. And of course, as I said, there
are other reasons too. The little girls—'

'If all you want is a change of house,' said Henry,
breaking in with it impatiently, 'then what about mine?'

'Good old Henry!' said John. 'Ever an eye to the main
chance! Edward's property is greater than mine, but ten
times greater than yours.'

'It's Edward who wants the change,' said Henry. To his
cousin, he suggested: 'It's an old house, and not so airy-fairy
as this shell of John's. But it stands high up—'

'No, no!' said Sir Edward, almost violently. 'Not that!
That wouldn't do.'

'—and harbours no ghosts, I promise you.'

Edward Hilbourne went the ashen grey that Miss
Tetterman had observed on that day, now many months
ago, when first she had come to Aberdar Manor. 'Ghosts!
What do you mean?'

‘Good heavens, my dear man, only a joke! Being an old abbey, or built from the stones of the abbey, de-consecrated by our villainous, but ever to be blest beneficiary, Great Harry, it has a reputation. But none of us has ever seen a haunting, not of any kind.’ He said curiously, ‘What ails you, man? Are you ill?’

‘He is not ill and you are a fool,’ said John. ‘Come, Edward, your anxieties and—imaginings—are your own business. But meanwhile, what do you say to Henry’s proposition? It sounds not impracticable?’

‘Impossible,’ said Edward, head bent, hands between his knees, bowed forward. ‘It wouldn’t answer.’

‘If one, why not the other? It’s a magnificent old place.’

‘I wouldn’t... Madame Devalle, she wouldn’t like that house either.’

Henry, in his rather brutal way, consigned Madame Devalle to perdition. John said, more gently: ‘This is all something more important than your dragon, Edward, isn’t it? Come—we are your friends...’

‘It was a mere suggestion,’ said Henry. ‘Nothing final to it. But in fact the Abbey is too large for me, the estate barely covers the cost of running it. And I have heavy expenses, a wife with sufficiently extravagant tastes—I say nothing against that, she must keep her carriage and be dressed accordingly, a woman in our situation must compete with her equals, and especially in her clothes and jewels, her furs and so on. And then five children, three boys to educate—’

Edward Hilbourne lifted his head sharply. He said again: ‘It won’t do.’

‘We could come to some arrangement about money—’

‘It won’t do,’ he repeated—quite savagely now; and cried out, almost explosively for so grey and quiet a man,

‘Good God, am I to remove my children from the place, only to bring other children there?’

‘If John and Maria—’

‘John and Maria have no children; and, as I understand it, John—forgive me!—are like to have none?’

‘Your children have sad memories,’ said John, gently. ‘There would be none there for other children: none for Henry’s boy, Arthur, and the younger ones. There would be no past for them, at Aberdar.’

‘There would be a future,’ said Edward Hilbourne and made a sign, again almost violently, as though forcing the whole subject aside. ‘Let it all be forgotten. I regret that I came.’

‘It’s forgotten, then, my dear fellow. I’m only sorry we can neither of us help you. Come, let’s have the ladies in and ask them for a cup of tea...’

The ladies, in fact, were not far to find, their coiffures still a little ruffled by close contact with the sitting-room door. Sweet-tempered and kindly, they had been much disturbed by the fruits of their eavesdropping and now set themselves to temper the evident pain of this strange, incomprehensible man.

He rose at last to depart, feeling a little as though pretty grooms had brought a rough mountain pony in out from the rain and, with brush and curry-comb, tenderly smoothed him down. He felt that he owed them some explanation of this visit and request for their presence and at last, haltingly, offered a word or two. ‘I’m afraid that I troubled you to no purpose. I wanted to discuss my—my present situation at the Manor, and thought that a—a little conference might somehow help me...’

‘You feel that your Belgian Dragon is hardly a confidante?’

‘It was to some extent *about* my Belgian Dragon,’ he said, smiling.

‘Edward dares not lose her,’ said John, ‘or he must face scandal on account of the children’s governess. But, also, Madame does not care for Aberdar Manor. Poor Edward’s at a loss how to reconcile his necessary dragon with her lair.’

‘He’d better build her another one,’ said Catherine, lightly, ‘and settle her in that.’

Sir Edward stared back at her blankly. In all these years of agony, so simple a solution had never even occurred to him—seemed never to have occurred to all those of his forebears who, generation after generation, had suffered as he had done. He stammered: ‘Build another house? *Keep* it all, keep everything I’ve known and loved all my life—simply take the children from the Manor itself, somewhere else on the estate, simply build another house...!’

But why should his hostess look at him suddenly so strangely?—and ask him, anxiously: ‘Do you feel it cold, Edward? Shall we build up the fire?’

CHAPTER 6

TOMOS STOOD IN THE doorway, literally trembling with the shock of it. 'I'm sorry, sir! I'm sorry, sir! I don't know what happened. The door seemed to just—just be too heavy for my hand.' He lent a strong forearm to help the Squire to his feet. 'It hasn't hurt you, sir? You're not injured, sir? Your head—?'

'A mere glancing blow, Tomos. The door slammed back and caught me on the forehead. It wasn't your fault. Just help me over to the fire; I feel suddenly very cold and—a trifle unsteady.' Collapsing into a chair, holding out his hands to the blaze, he repeated in his own kind way, but yet as though half-bemused: 'No fault of yours. The door... It's a very heavy old door...'

'It seemed like I couldn't hold it, sir. I feel right bad about it.' The man pulled himself together. 'Shall I call The Wall—shall I call Madam, sir? A glass of brandy, Squire, let me bring you a glass of brandy?'

'Find Miss Tettyman, Tomos, and ask her to come. Not Madam, not for the moment. Then, yes, a half-glass of brandy.' He put his hand to his head. 'No cut, no blood. Just an ache, that's all.'

She came flying down the broad oak staircase to him, knelt at his side. 'Tomos says... Are you hurt? Are you ill?'

'The hurt is nothing,' he said. 'The illness—I think that is mortal.'

For a moment she was frightened, but she supposed him hardly conscious of what he was saying. The man came with brandy. 'Oh, Tomos, I think not—I know that it's usual, but I think that for a—a blow on the head...'

Tomos glanced at the scarred cheek and looked swiftly away. 'I daresay you know best, Miss. Whatever you say.'

'Perhaps a hot drink, hot and sweet—ask Cook: the Squire seems so cold. And a rug, fetch a rug first, Tomos, and then, Tomos, send Bethan up to the nurseries—or perhaps Cook would go herself, they mustn't be frightened and Menna's so good with them. Go quickly, never mind the rugs after all, I'll get the rugs.' She ran off on her light feet, crinoline swaying, and came back with carriage furs from the cloakroom that led off from the hall. 'Let me put these around you, sir; hug them close to you, you're shivering...'

Tante Louise came swaying down the stairs in her fine flounced gown, with all her urgency yet picking her careful way. '*Qu'est-ce qu'il y a, Edouard? Tu as froid? On dit que tu es tombé—*'

'I tripped in the doorway, Louise. It's nothing. *Soyez tranquille; un petit choc, pas plus que ça. Mademoiselle m'a—*'

'*Et bien—Mademoiselle!* What do you here, Mees? It is not business of la gouvernante—'

'I heard that Sir Edward was hurt, Madame, and happened to be first on the scene. I've sent Tomos for a hot drink—'

'*Cognac, il faut du cognac—*' She snatched up the glass on the table at his side. '*Pourquoi—?*' He waved a limply dismissive hand. '*Mais si, mon cher, j'insiste—*'

'I believe, Madame—I've been taught that for a blow on the head, it is best not to give spirits.'

'You! What do you know about it? I think I am the one to know what is good. Come, Edouard; le cognac!'

He shook his weary head, lips closed against it. 'Comment? Do you take notice of this stupid girl? What does she know? Come, drink!'

'Louise, leave me alone!'

‘Madame, believe me, I know what I’m talking about.’ She put one hand to the scar; it was the first time she had ever openly referred to it. ‘Do you think I have not had experience? It is wrong to make him take brandy. I won’t let him. I’m not going to allow it.’ And as Madame Devalle, in a rage of indignation still tried to manoeuvre the glass to his lips, she took it from her hand, tipped the untouched spirit back into its decanter and carrying both, walked away to the dining-room. Tomos appeared from the kitchen, carrying a tray.

Tante Louise, pretending only outraged dignity, was in fact sick and terrified at heart. This little nobody taking over from her, giving orders, accepted by all as to be obeyed! She will come here, she thought, she will be mistress here: have I not expected it from the first? Lady Hilbourne!—his wife, mother to the children. That poor Anne, she thought, she might have been touched in the head, but is this scarred Thing to take her place, is she to take precedence in all things over *me*...?

She sat close up to the Squire, taking his limp hand in her own, pouring out her rapid French. ‘Be persuaded by me, *mon cher*. What experience has she had, this young woman? You are too easy with her, Edouard, you question nothing. Be a little warned by me, she is capable enough, oh, *bien sûr*, in many ways excellent, but what do we know of her after all? What is her background?—she calls herself “at home” in that famous Greatoaks Park but suddenly she is shown the door—the reference not from the wife but from the gentleman of the house, and letters coming to her from him, and gifts....’ He turned his head wearily from side to side, seemed hardly to hear her, made no reply. She grew more urgent, lifted her voice. ‘You do not know all, you do not know the gifts that come; only the other day a box,

enamelled with forget-me-nots and a message entwined with the flowers, "*Toujours*". And inside the lid, those letters again, the initials of this Sir Charles Arden of Greateoaks: C.B.A. Did she hope to be Lady Arden there one day? Does she now hope...?' She dared not quite put it into words. 'I say only—*écoutez-moi*, Edouard, I advise you, you are weak and ill, she is playing the charming nurse, I say only to you, take good care...'

In the dining-room doorway, the slender brown figure had stood all this time, quiet and still. Now she came forward and, totally ignoring the juddering woman, knelt down again at his side. 'Will you go upstairs now? Are you well enough? Tomos and Rodric will help you up to your bed.'

He looked at her vaguely; she was frightened by the blankness in his eyes. Tomos had stood waiting, unable to understand a word, and now said, 'Yes, Miss. I'll fetch Rod.' She suggested with perfect calm to Madame Devalle as though nothing had happened: 'It will be best, Madame, if he should be taken to his room?'

'I shall arrange all,' said Madame, loftily. As swiftly as it had arisen, the storm of anxiety had blown itself out and she was able to recognise how unwise it had been to make reference to the possibility of marriage, to put such an idea into his head. Thank heaven, he had seemed hardly to take it all in; and, above all, thank heaven that Mees did not understand French!

The little girls lay curled together in the big white-hung four-poster bed. 'Did you feel the hands today, Lyn?'

'When we went into Papa's room. Weren't they *cold*?'

'Papa's whole room was cold. Tante Louise said it was because Tetty made Hannah open the window—'

'Tetty's always saying about fresh air!'

‘—but it wasn’t. Even standing close to the fire it was cold.’

‘If Papa’s ill, won’t he be able to take us away to another house, Christine?’

‘Do we want to go away from here?’

‘I think Papa believes that if we go to another house we won’t feel the cold hands.’

‘Papa doesn’t know about the hands.’

‘I think he might, but he doesn’t say he does. Hil knows. Would *you* like to go away from the house, Christine?’

‘I don’t think the house would let us,’ said Christine.

Any struggle as to the over-all care of the patient must be fruitless. The governess was despatched back to her own duties and a strong young woman called Blodwen, used to nursing, brought in under the dominance of Tante Louise. But news filtered through from Blodwen to the servants’ hall and was retailed to Miss in due course. The Squire seemed not to rally, remaining very pale and weak and speaking hardly at all. As to the actual nature of the malady, the visiting doctors seemed curiously vague, prescribing only as much good, simple food as the patient could be induced to eat, rest in bed, and to the huge indignation of Madame Devalle, fresh air. And: ‘These windows already are small enough, Madam; have the hangings removed, throw open the casements during the day; have the bed moved to that side of the room. As soon as he is strong enough, we will arrange for short drives for him about the countryside. And as much mental stimulation as possible. Have the young lady bring in the children twice a day at least, to chatter to him; if he can’t read, arrange for her to read to him, something of interest to him, but light and agreeable...’ To

his colleagues in the neighbouring town he confided: 'Not that I have much hope of any of it. What with the shock of his wife's death—'

'And of her life, even more,' said Dr Meredith, who had been Anne's medical attendant in the last years.

'A mental affliction. Poor man, I daresay it was difficult to live with.'

'Very difficult indeed,' said the other, whose lips on the subject had been sealed at the end by a 'mourning gift' so generous as to amount to a bribe.

'—well, the shock either way; it has left him with little stamina to resist such an incident as a blow on the head from the swinging-back of a heavy oak door.' He mused: 'Very strange. I've been in and out of that door over many years, never known it to swing. At any angle, it would just stand open. You don't think by any possible chance the servant—?'

'What, Tomos? He's a bit of a boyo, as they say in deepest Wales, but the Squire's a good master, Meredith, what could the man gain by such an act? They do say that Sir Edward had thoughts of moving from the house?'

'It would hardly avail Tomos to attack him on that account?'

'Well, no—he would doubtless take his servants with him. In a way,' said the doctor, musing, 'one would rather wish a move for them. There is something very strange about the old house.'

'I've noted it myself,' said Dr Horder. He suggested: 'Something almost—haunting.'

'Oh, I wouldn't use that word for it,' said Dr Meredith, mindful of his undertakings.

Madame's interpretation of the doctor's orders was much

what one might have expected. The bed was duly moved, since he would be able to check up on it, so that the patient might lie and look out of the window—on to that bleak hillside rising up immediately opposite, with its bare winter trees; lie and wonder, perhaps, whether or not he would ever again see the woodlands clothed in green. And the curtains at the windows were replaced by the lighter ones of summer, but the casements remained open for the duration of the doctor's visits, and then were tight closed again. As to the nice bright young lady who was to bring the children for cheering visits, who else, in the eyes of Tante Louise, but Bethan, plain, simple Bethan with her kind, round face, devoid of the smallest sign of superior intellect.

Nor, as to reading aloud, was that anything that Blodwen could be expected to accomplish, since she could hardly do more than write her name. Tante Louise must take it upon herself. Her first efforts to read, in English, a novelette chosen by herself, unfortunately brought on a severe headache and the patient must ask her to desist; hereafter he endured with closed eyes, readings in her mother-tongue, so that she might soon presume him asleep and thankfully slip away.

Indeed, the whole invalid scene was beyond words *ennuyante* to her and she intruded there as little as possible; but with Edouard so ill, and helpless to defend himself against scheming wiles, she was not risking any sick-bed marriages, that was certain! It had passed through her mind that she herself was after all only very distantly related and that to secure the well-being of his children by giving her the authority of a closer relationship, he just possibly might... But in the very moment of its inception, the idea had been dismissed. He could bear her presence as part of his household, only for the children's sake. She was plain, to

his standards un-cultured, to his tastes unattractive, and was moreover his senior by almost twenty years. No chance whatsoever of her ever by marriage becoming the true mistress of Aberdar Manor. Madame was a realist.

But if she could not—then at least no one else should do so.

At Christmas, Mees must of course import one of the decorated trees that the Prince Consort had introduced into England from his Germanic origins. Tante Louise was disgusted. ‘All on the carpets dirt and leaves, what great pot is this that you have for holding this foolish tree? Do you think I shall permit this in my salon...?’

‘We could have it in any other room, Madame, of course. But the little girls—’

‘We shall have it not at all. Tell Tomos to have taken away this stupid thing.’

‘But, Madame, I’ve promised, they’re so excited—’

‘Then it is all the fault of you. You have had no permission, Mees.’

‘They’ve told their father all about it, Madam, and he hasn’t objected.’

‘They have spoken no word of it to me.’

They know a good deal better than to do that, thought Miss to herself, with perhaps a small quiver of guilt in consciousness of her own lack of encouragement in that direction.

‘N’importe quel—tout ça, je n’accepte pas. I forbid.’

‘Madame, their father—’

Madame’s brow grew very black. ‘Mademoiselle—Mees Tettaireman—*puis-je vous demander, s’il vous plaît*—who is or is not mistress in this house? And therefore what I say—is that not the end of it?’

‘Except when the master says otherwise, perhaps?’ said Miss Tettaireman with suitably downcast eyes; and executed a little bob curtsey and almost fell over her feet making as swift get-away.

‘Well, there’s silly you are, Miss!’ said Tomos, encountered—curiously enough—just outside the door. ‘Why not just set up your precious tree in the servants’ hall?’

She had seen him several times—always strictly in the presence of Tante Louise—but it was a shock to recognise how weak the Squire had grown, still thinner and more pale, assisted down the broad stairs by Tomos and Hil, carefully lowered into a deep chair in the Hall. But he had made an effort, obviously, for the sake of the little girls, sporting a *robe d’intérieur* of many-coloured silk over the narrow trousers, tapering to the ankle, and a matching satin cravat. He wore his greying hair rather long, but with only a short side-whisker, never beard or moustache. His eyes lit up with rare pleasure when he saw the radiant faces of all about him and the children gazing rapturously at the glittering tree.

Tante Louise had considered that white pinafores, hand-tucked and embroidered, were sufficient presents for two little girls, with a ribboned box for each of sugared almonds, especially sent over from Paris. Miss, however, had had quite other ideas and had galvanised the increasingly friendly staff into a frenzy of shaping and stitching and carving and colouring and baking and cake-ing; the glittering white snow outside was rivalled by the sparkle of frosting and candlelight on the seven-foot tree, with its twin fairy dolls, all a-twinkle with wings and wands at the very tip-top—(‘Oh, Tetty, I want the one with the

golden dress!’ ‘No, no, *I* want the one with the golden dress! Christine can have the silver one...’)

The staff stood round beaming, hands clasped before ‘best’ starched white aprons, or behind uniform coats. Tante Louise had shown her disapproval of the whole exaggerated piece of nonsense, by wearing her dullest black moiré; Miss Tetterman, however, was in her grey silk with the little lace collar and a sepia brown velvet bow at her throat. (Anyone else, thought Madame, would have worn a grey ribbon to match the silk, or plain black; one had always to allow it to Mees that she had a clever head when it came to dress—the brown toned charmingly with the pale grey, and exactly matched the colour of her eyes and hair.) ‘Oh, Papa, Tetty’s wearing her best dress, do you like her dress, Papa? It’s her best grey silk... Tante Louise, do you like Tetty’s lovely silk dress?’

‘Have you no ornaments, Mademoiselle, that you wear none on this great occasion? No brooch, perhaps, no ring?’

She did not know that Sir Edward’s eyes were turned towards her, watching her face, that, seeing the faint flush that mounted there, he turned them abruptly away and looked down at his hands; that Hil also was keenly watching her. She said, steadying herself, ‘I think that you are the last person, Madame, to wish the governess to deck herself in jewellery. Even if she had any.’

‘And have you not?’

‘None that I would wear this afternoon, Madame, at any rate.’

‘Not even the pretty little *cadeau* which you recently received? A chain, I believe, with a small pendant in gold and turquoises—the flower you call in English forget-not-me?’

Now she flushed like a rose. ‘Madame is not particular

as to how she obtains her information, I think.'

'Not when one must watch the proper conduct of one who has in her care innocent children.'

The little girls, ever perceptive, had caught the chill in the two voices, and were upset by it. Hil took a hand of each. 'I think your dear Tetty has no need of any thing extra, has she?' he said, looking down at them, smiling. 'Just her pretty dress and her pretty ribbon bow—'

'And her sweet, pretty face,' said Menna, the cook, deliberately. 'And her sweet, pretty smile.'

She could afford to be generous—Menna. She was beautiful. In her middle forties now, she must be, for she had worked at Aberdar almost thirty years but her face was the purest oval, dark hair drawn down into a low bun at the back with the scrap of white muslin and lace on top, an apology for the regulation cap. On the tall side, her figure was extraordinarily graceful, softly and warmly rounded, her skin a uniform creamy white as though she were carved in soft ivory.

Everyone turned to look at her now, with a smile of gratitude. The children flew to clasp her round her waist, gazing up at her lovingly: 'Oh, Menna, you're pretty too!'

'Nobody calls *me* pretty,' said Tomos, teasing them. He suggested: 'Why doesn't Menna give us a bit of a song then?—and we'll all join in.' He added, 'If you're willing, sir?'

The little girls were enraptured. 'Oh, yes, Menna, yes Menna! The one about the swan. The one about Bronwen. Bronwen means white, in Welsh,' they confided to Tetty in their artless way. 'The song is about a swan called Bronwen, "the snowy-breasted swan".'

'Sing *Ar hyd y nos*, Menna,' suggested Hil. 'Everyone knows that, everyone can join in.'

'He's shy because he made up the one about the swan.'

No, no, Menna, sing about the white swan! We all know that too.'

The lovely golden voice, pouring out, untaught, untrained, yet sweet and true as a bird's: '*Bronwen, y cariad*—Bronwen, my loved one, my snowy-breasted swan...' The fine tenors and sopranos joining in in harmony, footmen, house-boy, nurserymaid, tweeny-maid, stable-hands, farm-folk, ringing the big room, all shyness and awkwardness shed in the lifting-up of hearts in the natural, everyday joy of their singing. Tante Louise, sitting stiff and resentful in her chair beside the Squire, stared round at them all in amazement: Miss Tetterman with tears in her eyes.

If, at the end, either expected an outburst of applause, they were disappointed. These were the Welsh, people who sang as naturally as they talked or breathed. It was their gift, unacknowledged as anything out of the ordinary; common to all. It was perfectly accepted that the two little girls should hardly wait for the last dying fall, to run forward to the tree. 'Can we all have our presents now?'

Miss Tetterman had made tactful preparations. Hil and Tomos lifted each a child to a pre-arranged package. Having had no competition, the embroidered pinafores were accepted with suitable delight, at once tied over the tiered crinolines held out by half a dozen starched petticoats, and the lace-edged pantalettes. They ran round offering sugared almonds, with little sketchy bob curtseys to the staff, all now sitting rather stiffly on benches against the white panelled walls. Tante Louise was horrified at so rapid a dispensation of the precious French dainties. '*Et, de plus—faut-il, mon cher, faire les révérences aux domestiques? Quant à moi, ce n'est pas du tout comme il faut!*'

'It is perfectly proper,' said the Squire, also in French, 'that young children should show respect for their elders—'

‘Mais, ce ne sont que les domestiques.’

‘—servants or anyone else. They offer the children their love and kindness and the children love them in return...Or perhaps,’ he said, smiling a little, ‘it is the other way about. They’re so confiding and sweet... After all, Louise, are they not?’

‘They are well enough,’ said Tante Louise, shrugging. In the depths of her cold heart, there was always a stirring of unease that these children should so have intruded themselves with their small melting-points of love. *‘Mais, enfin—c’est très ennuyant! Tous les bonbons—ils sont finis! J’avais beaucoup de difficulté les obtenir. On peut donner à ces sauvages—one may give anything to these savages, what do they know? Des “bull’s eye” would do them as well or much better. Ça me rend furieuse.’*

And indeed all the almonds were gone. ‘Now, Tetty, what? Now, Tetty, what?’

‘Lots more presents, my loves, for everyone. And look what comes next! From your dear papa!’

Riding habits—positively their own riding habits with little shining boots, and caps with a jaunty feather. They were enraptured. But it was all so exciting. ‘What next? What next?’

From herself, tiny gold locket, each centred with a semiprecious stone, a turquoise for Christine, a coral for Lyn. ‘Now we shall need no pink and blue ribbons to tell you apart...’

More cutting down of packages, more raptures, more handings-round. Hil moved unobtrusively to her side. ‘You are going to have trouble when you get to the top of the tree.’

She stood with him in an angle of the walls, a little apart from the throng. ‘Oh, Hil, yes! What a fool I was to

dress the dolls differently!’

‘You never learn, do you?’ said Hill. She glanced up to see if he were not half-teasing her, but he looked cold and angry. ‘By that time, they’ll be tired, even Christine won’t be easy to persuade, the old witch will back up her favourite and for that matter so will everyone else, including yourself—how can you all be so blind? And the whole thing will end in disaster, the Squire will be distressed—’

‘And all through my fault,’ she admitted, wretchedly. ‘All because I didn’t think.’

‘Much worse than that,’ he said, almost savagely. ‘It’s because you did think; thought only beneath your conscious thought, perhaps, but thought. Because the truth is that you *wanted* there to be a choice. Recognise it or not, you wanted there to be a struggle, you wanted your pet to win, you wanted to give in to Lyneth and have her love you the more for it. Why worry about Christine—win or lose, she will love you just the same with all her generous little heart; but the other one—she will love you, yes, but she’ll love you that much more if you give her what she wants.’

The children danced about the tree, were lifted up, reedy arms extended to take down the wrapped gifts from the upper branches; hung over the recipients, eagerly watching the unwrapping and exclaiming and exchange of thanks. The little dogs hopped about their feet with small, shrill yappings. ‘Oh, the dogs, the dogs! Haven’t we got any presents for the dogs?’

But Tetty had thought of everything. There were sugar-biscuits tied up in tiny separate packets and a bone for each, wrapped in silver paper. ‘At least,’ she said resentfully to Hil, ‘you can’t accuse me of favouritism among the dogs.’

‘You are angry with me?’ he said.

‘You are angry with *me*. And to speak out fairly, I don’t know that you have any right to be. Is it for you to upbraid the governess for her conduct towards her charges?’

‘You mean from my menial position as a servant here?’

‘You say that to be cruel. I know very well that you are not a servant here.’

‘You have been listening to the Squire,’ he said with a small self-deprecating shrug.

‘I’ve been listening to you, Hil. And looking at you. And thinking about your name: thinking about *you*.’

‘Well, then, I can only hope,’ he said grimly, ‘that you have not also been talking about me.’

She turned away her head and now all the light and movement about her was blurred with tears. ‘As if I would! As if I’d do anything to—to betray you, to betray the Squire! I’ve made mistakes, perhaps; perhaps you’re right to warn me about the children. But I love them both, I love—I love this whole place, I love the Squire and I love all the people. You know nothing about me, Hil, nothing about my background and my origins, you know nothing about the inner me, about what’s in my—in my heart. But this is all my world now, I’d do nothing to betray it, nothing to betray any of you—’

He looked down at her and now in his face there was something that seemed to her heightened emotions, to be a sort of terrible pity. ‘Why do you look at me, Hil, like that?’

‘I... Well, I have some—gift,’ he said. ‘If it is a gift and not a curse. At any rate I—know things. And I know that one day, in the far future, you *will* betray us. In spite of all these fine sentiments, not even knowing perhaps that you are doing so—one day you will betray us; you will destroy us all.’

Cold fingers, icy fingers, brushing against her cheek.

CHAPTER 7

THE SPRING CAME, HERALDED by the tiny blue blossoms of the squill, crouched close to the burgeoning earth, and the snowdrops followed, and crocuses, purple, yellow and white, studded the grassy terraces; and the fruit trees were speckled with their small, pale buds, shining against the dark branches; the great mulberry dormant still, purple against the long golden tresses of the willow trees, drooping over the rushing stream. And with the thin sunshine, the Squire crept down from his room and would sit for a little while in his library and, from the closed window, watch the children bowling their hoops up and down the gravelled drive, Lyneth as ever the clever, the skilful one; or playing hopscotch on a pitch scratched out for them on the flagstones by Hil, or skittering by on their ponies with Miss Tettyman in ever watchful attendance, the small dogs dancing out of the way of the polished hooves. But if now and again the young-old face lighted up with a smile, it too soon grew sad again. He sent for doctors, for lawyers, for financial advisers. He sent for Hil.

Hil came in with his small quick nod of the head that had nothing in it of servility, only much of a sort of affectionate respect. The Squire half-struggled up from his chair and relapsed back into it. 'James! Thank you for coming.'

He closed the door behind him, carefully. 'Better settle for Hil, Squire, once and for all. That way, you'll never drop into error.'

'Everyone knows, James; everyone must recognise the colour of your Hilbourne hair; everyone knows our father's

conquests of the village girls.' He mused: 'He was unhappy. What Squire of Aberdar has ever been otherwise?'

'No one blames him...'

'No, no: my mother always ailing, a recluse. And God knows, he paid for his sins in the end. I, at any rate, am ever grateful to him for having given me a brother.'

Hil went to the small table set out with decanter and glasses. 'Shall I pour out some wine to help us through the coming ordeal? For an ordeal, alas, most of our discussions nowadays must be.'

'As usual, it's about the fate of the children, James.' The thin hand lifted the glass of wine almost as though the weight of it were too much. 'We both face what's to come. But the children—'

'You know that I'll never desert them. I love them as if they were my own.'

'At my death, our cousins, Henry and John, would be jointly their guardians.'

'John is childless. What if he were to wish to take them into his home? Is that what you fear?'

He almost cried out: 'Never! It must never be! The children must never be taken from Aberdar. I had but to think of it—and you see what has been the result. The house will keep them here. There is some strange force...'

'We've long recognised it, brother, you and I—who are of the Hilbourne blood.' He suggested: 'You had thought of building a house elsewhere on the estate—?'

'I shall never now build a house anywhere; but it makes no difference—this has been a clear sign to me that literally the Manor has its power to keep its—victims—within its walls. The children must never try to leave it.' He rested a moment as though exhausted; rallied his strength. 'If your situation is made clear to my—our—cousins, surely that will

be sufficient to influence them to leave the little girls here under your care, with Madame in overall charge—and she is to be trusted; and the governess—’

‘Who is not to be trusted,’ said Hil.

‘Not trusted? She’s a very pearl; what ever fault could you find in her?’

‘I spoke involuntarily and I wish I hadn’t. It’s only that—you know that I get odd fancies, believe that I see into the future...’ But he would not trouble a dying man with his fathomless fears. ‘I know of nothing against her: nothing. Nothing real.’ But he suddenly looked shrewdly into the pale, anxious face. ‘You have no idea—? No thought in your mind—?’

‘A thought in my mind is all it could ever be,’ said the Squire, wearily. ‘But it has been there. Unthinkable: my poor Anne not yet a year dead. And yet—to leave one here who would have a real, legal control over Lyneth and Christine. And what has she to lose?—a poor governess with no future—’

‘Madame hints,’ said Hil, suddenly inexplicably dry, ‘that she has at least a past.’

‘—poor foolish woman, she is frightened of finding Mees taking precedence over her here—’

‘—and with some justification, it begins to appear?’

The Squire seemed hardly to hear him, lifting the glass again to his lips, shakily setting it down again. ‘I am a dying man. She would become mistress of wealth, of all this great manor, a ready-made family, two children whom already she truly loves...’

‘And a promising future,’ said Hil, grimly, ‘as a highly eligible widow.’

‘Well—I told you it was but a thought, passing through my ever searching mind...’

A scutter of hooves on the gravel outside and they went scampering by, gaily waving towards the window in hopes that Papa might be there and would glance out at them. Miss Tettermann followed them soberly in her own neat habit of the customary sepia brown, with a small hard hat. Their father looked out with love at the two happy faces with their shining, blue eyes and the soft, fair curls. 'It is enough to kill a man with the pain of it,' he said, 'to have such terror for them.'

'For all three of them,' said Hil, but he spoke below his breath. He said instead: 'Seen from this side, with no glimpse of the scar, she is a pretty enough creature, after all; and very sweet.'

Now it was the Squire's turn to look sharply into his brother's face. '*You* have no such thoughts as mine?' And he sat up very straight, a flush rose in his pale face, his frail hand gripped on the arm of the chair. 'It is not for you, Hil, to marry and bring more children to this doomed race. You are of the blood, the blood of this branch of the family, whatever curse lies upon us, lies on you too.'

'I remarked simply, Squire, that she is quite a pretty girl.'

But the sick man shook and trembled. 'Here am I, condemning my children to solitude for the rest of their lives, condemning these lovely girls to a life without love and marriage, rather than risk the tragedies that came to their poor mother, to my mother, and to hers and to hers. Will you now introduce a new generation... And this girl herself, will you bring down on her innocent head whatever forces there are that threaten us? What woman marrying into this family has ever known an hour of health and happiness?—whether she be of the Hilbourne blood or not...'

Hil said, almost savagely: 'Such considerations didn't move you when you yourself contemplated making her a Hilbourne bride.' But his heart smote him. 'Forgive me, brother, forgive me—I don't mean to wound you. And set your mind at rest, no such intention has ever so much as occurred to me.' He rose and pressed Sir Edward gently back to rest against the pillows of his chair, took the shaking hand and folded it round the wine glass. 'Compose yourself, you have nothing to fear from me.'

The high flush faded, he shook now with something other than fear. 'Put some more logs on the fire, James, it grows so cold, so cold...' But it was a chill that they both too well knew. Hil said: 'I'll build up the fire, but it won't warm the room, I fear. In this old library, unchanged for so many generations—whatever threatens us comes always very close. Is it the room itself? Remember that you once dreamed—?'

'After Anne's death. If only I could recollect... Some malediction was pronounced: that seems to force its way into my mind but no more than that. Only the words, "Never again... Never again..." '

'If we could know what exactly lay behind it. The precise terms, as it were, of the curse, if a curse there was.'

'The family annals have been searched through, often enough. A history going back two hundred and fifty years, of broken, unhappy marriages, the deaths of young children, of girls in childbirth: but seemingly indiscriminate, applying to those of the blood but also to those brought into the family as wives or husbands, with no such heritage...'

There must be more in the way of investigation to be done. If I were to make a far more thorough search—' Hil rose to his feet. 'You're exhausted, I've stayed too long—and said too much. We'll meet again, another day: meanwhile,

I'll seek to discover more, something more specific.'

'God knows whether even that is wise. To meddle with the unknown.'

'We can't go on with this cobweb of terrors—let me at least try to trace some thread running through it all. Meanwhile, be at peace. You may yet recover your strength, it isn't all hopelessness and, whatever may happen, you know that I shall never, while I live, cease my love and care for the children; and the old Walloon is a tower of strength, love or unlove her as we may. And there is this excellent young woman—this—this pearl, as you have called her...'

And the cold grew terrible, grew terrible, clutching with icy hands about his heart. One day, this pearl would betray, would destroy them all.

CHAPTER 8

FREE TIME FOR THE governess was considered by Madame Devalle to be by no means a matter of necessity but Edouard had insisted, with his usual foolishness, that Miss Tettyman—no one nowadays bothered to correct him as to her name—must have regular hours of leisure and, moreover, be made free of transport if she wished to go into the village or even to town. She said, speaking in French: ‘Very well, then, today she may take the children to try their new shoes.’

‘That would hardly be a holiday for her. She must be free of them now and again. How would *you* like never a moment to yourself?’

‘I am not a servant, *mon cher*. *Et plus que ça*, two of them at a time, they give me the headache, it is too much for me.’

‘A governess may have a headache as well as another.’

‘If she is so delicate, she had better not take such a position. After all, is it such a penance,’ said Tante Louise, somewhat shifting her ground, ‘to sit quietly and read to two children on a wet afternoon?’

‘No, and that’s what I myself will do, on this particular wet afternoon. Owain is driving her in the dog-cart wherever she wishes to go.’

‘Yes, well you had better look out for this Owain,’ said Madame, her speech increasing in rapidity as her irritation irrationally grew, ‘and see that your treasure doesn’t go making a fool of herself. What else is she good for, poor scarred creature, with no *dot* to bring to a marriage, nothing but a few false pretensions to gentility? And he’s not a bad

looking young lout—’

He gave her a look of sick rage, be quiet, Louise! You have an ugly mind.’

‘And she has an ugly face; and, I strongly suspect, an ugly past to go with it.’

‘Be quiet, I tell you!’

‘Oh, yes—be quiet! And let *you* be the one to make a fool of yourself. Better leave her to her stable boys. You would not be the first master of the house into whom she had got those little claws of hers. Oh, you never believe me; but, for example, why do you think she drives down to the village today? She goes to post a letter, one which she won’t leave on the hall table for Tomos to collect.’ As he struggled to his feet and made for the door, in his feeble haste stumbling as he went, she cried out after him: ‘With Sir Charles Arden’s name on it, my dear, and—listen to this and see how you like it!—in the care of an accommodation address.’

For Tante Louise was not without her informant in that house. She of the many grievances, and most of them concentrated nowadays upon the governess with her airs and graces and need to be waited upon, had discovered where her bread might be buttered—with however sparing a hand. Olwen the upstairs housemaid, with an ear to every keyhole and a talent for fiddling open every locked drawer.

Still—what right had a governess to secret conversations and secret correspondence and secret possessions hidden away in secret drawers? And if Madam felt no qualms of conscience as to discovering them, certainly Olwen need not.

And, sure enough, Miss Tetterman was posting a letter—hurriedly scribbled, upon unexpected notice being given of

her afternoon's freedom. To: Sir Charles Arden, and at an accommodation address. 'I think you had best not write to me here again. I believe I am increasingly spied upon. And pray send no more gifts. Cherish them as I may, and all that they speak to me, it grows increasingly difficult to parry questions. I am safe and well and sufficiently happy and you will not need me to tell you that I constantly think of you and with how much longing. But it is all too dangerous, the woman I told you of is jealous and spiteful. Supposing she were to write to her ladyship, I think she is by no means beyond it. If you positively must, then address me in the care of the post office of this village, always remembering that I may be able to call here not more often than once in two or three weeks. In haste, A.'

Owain, whatever might be Tante Louise's suspicions, seemed very happy to be sent off to amuse himself elsewhere and, the rain holding off after all, Tetty went for a long, thoughtful walk along the riverside; nor was he apparently so eager for her company as to return with any great despatch at the hour appointed. Standing waiting for him in the shelter of the lych gate, she saw that Hil was riding down the road towards her. He came up to the gate and dismounted. 'I heard that you were in the village, and came to meet you.'

She had hardly seen him since the Christmas party, and never alone. Now her heart left its present cares and lifted a little. 'To meet *me*?' But she caught at a sudden fear. 'There's nothing wrong—?'

'No, no, your treasures are all right. What is the nurse-maid for? I just thought... It is a little lonely for you, taking your few leisure hours all by yourself, and with so little to amuse you in this place.'

'Oh, yes...' she said, confused. 'It's very kind of you.'

But I do very well. I've been for a walk along the riverbank.'

'You can walk along the river at any time. But then of course you are in a scramble of children and dogs and sometimes an intruder like myself.' He gave her the same sort of little deferential bow that he gave to the Squire. 'But perhaps I'm an intruder now?'

'Oh, Hil!' she said. 'Of course not!'

'I thought Owain might ride my horse home and I could later drive you back in the dog-cart.' He looked around at the small huddle of buildings with its one little shop-cum-post-office. 'There is not much to do, but the church is very old and interesting. Would you care for a tour of it?'

Doubts and questions scurried like mice about her mind. It was all a little strange—this sudden access of forethought, of consideration, of an attempt at a special friendship; and underlying it somehow, faintly, an air of purpose. Observing her hesitation he said with an ironic lift of the eyebrows: 'Or perhaps you think Squire Hilbourne's farm factotem not a suitable escort for so polished a young lady as yourself?'

'Oh, *Hill!*' He was so—beautiful: there was never any other word for it—standing there, slender and arrow-straight with his deep blue eyes and his curl of auburn hair. Tears filled her eyes. 'You say that to be unkind. When have I ever...? We both know very well that you are no factotum.'

'Will you do me the honour then to walk through the church with me?' As she hesitated, he added coolly: 'Or will you not? If not, here comes Owain with the trap and you are most welcome, I assure you, to go home with him.'

'Very well,' she said. 'Since you round off your invitation so graciously, I'll take you at your word and go home.'

But he caught at her wrist and held it almost—fiercely. ‘No, no—stay! I’m sorry. I...’ He made a sort of helpless movement with his head, glancing away from her. ‘You confuse me.’ And he left her, going to meet the groom, exchanging a few words with him, seeing to the securing of the pony and trap, sending off his own horse with Owain in the saddle; returned and, taking her lightly by the upper arm, led her up the path and into the church. She said to cover her onrush of mixed emotions: ‘It’s a very old church?’

Very old: crouching, squat, beneath its squat, square tower. ‘And very large for so small a parish?’

‘You forget that this was an abbey once and this would be its church. It survived when King Henry razed the monastery and threw out the monks and it was all handed over to Sir Edward Hilbourne, the Squire of that day. Sir Edward chose to lease off the lands piecemeal and leave the buildings, as they gradually fell into ruin, to be robbed of their stones for the farms and cottages surrounding it. He himself enlarged his own manor house and extended his demesne, on the further side of the stream. But this also is all Hilbourne land.’ With his hand still at her elbow he guided her up the centre aisle. ‘And here is his tomb.’

All dark marble and bronze, with the two bronze figures lying so stiffly asleep there, hand in hand, Edward Hilbourne, and Catherine, his wife: she would have been christened no doubt for Henry’s first Queen, not yet supplanted by the sloe-eyed Anne Bullen. Supporting their feet, in the long, narrow shoes, was the customary small dog, rather touchingly lying supine with his legs in the air. She reached up to pass her palm over the smooth bronze muzzle. ‘It seems to bring it all back to life,’ she said. ‘It reminds one that they were real people, not just walking

effigies. I daresay this was a favourite pet?’

‘I would think so. Most of these creatures were formalities. But in this case, there does seem an air of familiarity and only a dog much loved and petted, will lie like that, flopping about easily with no fear of attack from any quarter. Catherine, ten years younger and surviving him.’

The names and dates of their seven children were inscribed round the sides of the tomb. ‘They seem to have been a thriving family,’ said Hil, off-handedly. ‘They all outlived their parents.’ He led her slowly down the side-aisle, idly commenting, and then: ‘This one was not so fortunate. *His* daughter died in childbirth, leaving only one surviving twin boy.’

‘Here is her beautiful memorial, all in bronze—1574-1592.’

In a great niche in the wall, the rigid figure, seated, life-size, with its praying pointed hands, a tiny mannikin lying stiffly in the spread lap as though a corpse sat upright, nursing the corpse of a miniature grown-up. Propped against her knee, the figure of a young man, head thrown back in an attitude of death, a second tiny figurine in the crook of his arm. ‘“Isabella, widow of John Lloyd”—widow, Hil, and she could only have been eighteen or nineteen! “Daughter of Sir Edward Hilbourne, Squire of Aberdar Manor. Died in childbirth”.’ She looked more closely. ‘She’s the same Isabella whose portrait hangs at Aberdar—so closely resembling Lyneth and Christine.’

‘And here is the tomb of Sir Edward, her father. Well, well—lived to see his daughter and her husband dead in the same year; and here is Henry, his only son, killed in the same hunting accident that destroyed the son-in-law, John Lloyd. What could any man have done to deserve such a life

of tragedy?’

‘The son, Henry, married, but having as yet no children: so how fortunate that Isabella’s one surviving twin at least was a boy, to carry on the line. Though, in fact, the inheritance may pass through the female line?’

‘Yes, that’s how Christine, the elder by the hour, is heir to the manor. I must try to discover whether or not this was a later arrangement, made because so many children were lost at birth, or died very young.’

‘Has this occurred, then, all down through the family history?’

He said carefully: ‘It’s almost as though there were a curse upon them.’

They passed on down a side aisle, stepping, she with delicate reluctance, upon the great flagstones, often with brass inlays, that marked the resting places of the family. She suggested: ‘I sometimes think—with his anxiety about the children meeting with others—that the Squire believes in a curse, and wishes the line not to continue into further tragedy.’

‘I think you may be right,’ he said.

‘Ah—yes! And so you begin to enquire more closely into the family history—and bring in the governess to assist you?’

He looked down at her, smiling. ‘You have a quick mind, Miss Tetty, haven’t you?—in that pretty head of yours.’

Her heart gave a small lurch. She said: ‘You are rather kinder to me, today, Hil, than you have been in the past.’

‘I have these strange—misgivings. I feel angry urges to, as it were, warn you. But I tell myself that it may be only fancy and I should not punish you, resent you, whatever may be the right word, because of my own imaginings.’

‘But what is it that you imagine?’

‘I wish I could know more exactly. I suppose it’s in some way tied up with this idea of a family anathema.’

‘Surely in these modern days, no one still actually believes in such things?’

‘You’ve suggested yourself that the Squire does.’

She said sadly, ‘He’s ill, weary, anxious about the possibility of his leaving his children to the care of others...’

‘—who won’t accept the idea of a curse upon them. So you and I—’

‘You and I?’

‘Who else cares about them? You love them, I know. I think we should join forces to try to discover what may threaten them, if anything does, and how to control their lives if their father does die.’

They had stopped by the ancient font, the thin evening sunshine pouring down upon them through the heavy stained-glass windows. And he looks like something from a stained-glass window himself, she thought; like a saint of the olden days with his beautiful face and the halo of his red-gold hair. Her spirit rose in a sort of exultation at the thought that she might so work with him as he had suggested, come closer to him, share his very mind with him. But she dragged her thoughts from herself and her sudden longings. ‘Do you really think the Squire will die?’

‘I think he may. He believes it himself and, God knows, every day he seems to grow more—shadowy.’

‘To believe that one is going to die—to believe one is not going to get better—is no way to help oneself to get better. So much is in the mind.’

‘He believes, you see, that it’s part of the curse upon him.’

‘Dear heavens! And that then the curse would pass to

his children?’

‘I think he believes it is already upon them. But what shape it takes exactly, no one can fathom. I thought that if, while he yet lives, we might trace some form to it, discover when it was uttered, under what circumstances, we might be able to help him, perhaps to discredit or at any rate to isolate it, as it were, from an all-embracing threat. For instance, we have seen today that while succeeding generations flourish, suddenly the next and the next fall to tragedy. Was that when the curse began?—with that Sir Edward whose daughter, Isabella, died in childbirth, already a widow? Or, if we work backwards—as you know, the Squire’s own wife, Anne, died young—and from the time the twins were born, or even before, had been ailing—imagined people about her: the servants believed she was mad. His mother before him—well, that marriage was unhappy from the beginning, his father turned for comfort to other women and, still a young man, was killed: to all intents and purposes committed suicide. And so it went on; even *his* grandfather took some infection from his small son, and both died, only a little girl being left to inherit. She, marrying a Hilbourne cousin, presumably by arrangement, carried on the name. And so it goes on.’

‘Marriage between close relations is never very safe?’

‘That is the modern thinking.’

‘So mightn’t this be the explanation? That whenever the property fell to a female—to preserve the Hilbourne name, such a marriage between cousins was arranged, and so we get the deaths in childbirth, deaths in infancy, the mental instability. Death by accident—that must occur now and again without any curses on a family. The rest may yet be accounted for quite naturally?’

He stood with his hand on the heavy carved stone of

the font, looking down at her with something like astonishment. 'I was right, indeed, when I said you had a quick mind in your clever head—'

(In my 'pretty head' was what you said, she thought; and regretted the alteration.)

'—and here you come forth, with a more reasonable explanation that anyone has yet thought of. If we could trace back to these same marriages... At any rate, I will put your suggestion to the Squire and it may well go a long way to allay his fears.' His face was alight with enthusiasm; he snatched up her hand and kissed it. 'If only for the peace of mind it might give him,' he said. 'I can never thank you enough.'

She thought as she closed her hand, fierce and protective over that almost unthinking, impulsive, all too meaningless kiss—that already he had thanked her enough to reward her for the rest of her days.

CHAPTER 9

NOW THE SQUIRE SAT in his chair no longer, but was supported at midday down the broad staircase by Tomos and the footman, and lay all afternoon on a day-bed arranged in his library, propped up against cushions, his thin legs bent at the knees, forming a peak beneath the light rug, slanted inwards to rest against the side of the couch. Ill and deeply depressed, he paid no great heed to Hill's insistence upon the possibility of a natural explanation of the sequence of family tragedies; but he gave all assistance to the search for proof, decreeing that Miss Tettyman must have such free time as she herself thought proper, and use it as she would. She took it as sparingly as she might without in any possible way neglecting her charge of the children, excusing such hours as she did spend away from them by the reflection that it was all ultimately to their advantage. And all that time was spent with Hil.

Tante Louise was predictably enraged and disgusted. 'So now, Mees, it is not the stable-boy but the farm-servant?'

'You would not blame me, Madame,' said Mees sweetly, controlling her temper, 'for attempting to raise my station in the world?'

'You will not get far with that one.' She used an ugly expression. There was no need to pretend not to grasp its meaning. 'That woman, that Menna—she could tell you!'

Miss Tetterman laughed outright. 'Menna! Hil—with the cook! And she is older anyway, old enough to be his mother.'

'*N'importe!* He will take what comes, that one! Closed away here from the world of loose women who would give

him what he needs; and he could give them back as good, *je vous assure*. But you yourself are hardly without experience—you would recognise that.'

Now she did cry out in outrage. 'Madame!'

'Oh, you may not allow it even to your secret thoughts, it is all very beautiful, it has all been for love, has it not my English Mees, so *bien élevée*, so *comme il faut*! But don't trouble yourself, I see in you what beneath all this wonderful propriety you really are. You think I am blind but I am *femme du monde*, my dear, I have eyes to see that you are one who is passionate.'

Miss controlled herself from the sick trembling, the ague of trembling that suddenly assailed her. She said more steadily: 'I think that the eyes you see with are jealous eyes, Madame. It is Olwen who reports all this filth to you.'

'Olwen! How dare you so speak to me? *I* do not consort with the servants, I am not such as you are. For this impertinence, Mees, you shall regret, I shall speak with Sir Edouard—'

'Speak away, Madame. You will find that the Squire will not listen to calumny against Hil, picked up from a foul-minded housemaid, sick with her own self-pity. Nor of Menna, so long with this household, so loving and loyal.'

'Ah, yes, Menna, indeed. Loving, indeed! And loyal indeed, to the poor sick wife of the old Squire, your master's father! She is one of those, my dear, and you may take it from me: I have seen enough of them, I perfectly recognise her kind. Which, after all, unless I am much mistaken, whether you know it or not, is your own. You are hot after the men, the pair of you...' She spoke by now almost entirely in French, gabbling it all out in a rapid stream of hate. It will be best, thought Miss Tetterman, that I seem not to understand, she shan't know that my ears have been

sullied by all this dirt and vilification. Lovely Menna, easy and kind—and Hil, with his face of a saint, the sunshine pouring through the golden glass lighting a halo about his red-gold head...

But lying through the sleepless night in her white, curtained bed, she heard the harsh voice screeching still in her ears: the ugly phrases, hardly comprehensible to her inexperience and yet somehow all too fully understood. And, 'Even to your secret thoughts... I see you as what, beneath all this outward propriety, you are. You are one who is passionate—' No, no! she had cried out silently: and yet... 'You have within yourself great depths,' her father had said, in those long hours of her vigil at his dying bedside. 'Have a care! Love is all-beautiful. But there, again, may come the lightning flash: and when it comes, beware that your passion may be sweet and pure, and not grow too fierce and rampant, beyond your control.' One flash had come in the too recent past, that had all but destroyed her in a sickness of bitter resentment, would have destroyed her but for remembrance of those tender counsellings. Had there come again that other lightning flash that had no hatred in it but only too much of love? Is this glow in my heart, this longing in my body, the innocent fresh passion that goes with a girl's love for a man? Or is it the rampant dark weed that that woman sees in me? And...

And had the lightning flash struck her lover too?

So the spring passed and she wandered with her pretty darlings through the flowery meadows and watched the skittering of the lambs and the gentle ambling of the milch cows, the springing of the crops, painting over the rich brown earth with their first wash of palest green and so to the summer... For the rest... For the rest, positively Miss

was neglecting the little girls. She took them with her when she could on earlier outings but the longing to be alone with Hil grew in intensity and soon she was permitting herself excuses—to wander about the old churchyard reading the inscriptions on its headstones was hardly a suitable occupation for them, one afternoon after another. Their lessons she attended to with the strictest fidelity: all morning they toiled away, though happily enough at their sums and their pot-hooks and their reading, chanted their ‘times-tables’ and the dates of the English kings: thumped dolorously on the schoolroom piano or settled in rapture to be read to, from carefully instructive books. But their luncheon over and the prescribed half hour’s rest, lying flat on their bed with pillows in the smalls of their backs to ward off curvature of the spine—it was time to take exercise; and how often nowadays it occurred that Tetty was too busy, and Olwain would be told to take them on their ponies to the field set up with low hurdles, and practise them in jumping, or Bethan to ramble the meadows with them, singing like three little larks as they gathered the flowers for daisy-chains and cowslip balls.

By tea-time, certainly, Tetty would be back again, as happy and laughing and kind as ever, their dear, lovely Tetty, and nowadays with such a sort of—shiningness—about her; and there would be stories of knights and ladies, Arthur and Guinevere, Lynette and Elaine; and darling Sir Galahad and brave Sir Lancelot. The children loved Galahad best of all the knights and so did Tetty sometimes, only sometimes she seemed to love Lancelot even more; the little dogs found themselves rechristened Gawain or Merlin—Merlin was a splendid dog who performed amazing feats of magic not unaided by Tetty’s simple sleight of hand—and Enid and Sir Bedivere. So even if Tetty did go out rather

often in the afternoons, she made it all up to them. And there were the attics.

The attics were largely given over to the servants' bedrooms. In the East Wing, the maids slept two to a bed, only the cook and the parlourmaid having rooms to themselves; and in the West Wing, the men. But there were yet the lumber rooms with their accumulation of the abandoned treasures of literally hundreds of years. There the little girls spent hours of bliss, hauling out the old playthings, the once-precious ornaments, the rotting satins and silks of generations of Hilbournes, long ago dead and forgotten. And here Miss Tetterman also spent hours of bliss: for she had discovered the diaries...

The diaries—old bills also, old books of accounts, old bundles of letters, filed tidily away after this death or that, until the powers that be should find time to attend to them...‘Sits in the schoolroom night after night,’ reported Olwen, ‘turning over them old pages, passing some over, peering into others as if they was the story of her life. If I stand in the window of the nursery, I can see her sitting by the fireside, all the papers around her...’

Most interesting. Was Mees perhaps contemplating a little mild blackmail?—recent history in the Hilbourne family had been of dubious propriety. Olwen had overheard the old women in the bakeries retailing to the younger staff not unlikely gossip about the present Squire's father. No blame to him, poor man; what a life with that wife of his, just the one delicate boy and after him, the bedroom door locked against her young husband! Run a bit wild, he had, not a girl for miles around had been safe with him and then gone and got himself drowned in the Dar, lower down towards Penrip; drunk as a lord he had been, galloping through the village, on his way to some assignation, no

doubt, on that moonless night. But the women had caught sight of the sallow face listening at the crack of the door and they closed up like oysters, and Olwen—and Madame—had had to be satisfied with that.

Now, however...‘Last night,’ confided Olwen, her fingers already closing in anticipation of the bribe to come, after all she had to tell, ‘I see her—reading, she was, through one of them books and she stops and stares at the pages and turns backwards and forwards in the book, and snatches up a bunch of papers, and searches through and then...’ She paused for effect and gave one of her unbeautiful sniffs.

‘*Eh bien*—and then?’

‘Back and forth, back and forth,’ said Olwen, ‘the book, the papers, looking about for more papers, and then...’

‘*Mon Dieu*, girl, have you got not *le mouchoir*? The hankersneef, girl, the hankersneef!’

Olwen lifted the corner of her apron and gave a resounding blow. It was all about very little, however, just the habit, thought Madame irritably, ugly and tiresome, like the girl herself. ‘*Alors, continuez!* This *histoire*,’ said Madame, guarding against too much complacency in her not very admirable confederate, ‘is not so very interesting, but you may as well finish with it.’

Olwen saw the promise of wealth dwindling uncomfortably. She in her turn affected an air of indifference. ‘No, right, Ma’am!—perhaps it is not so very important.’

‘Tell, tell!’ said Madame, impatiently. ‘*Continuez!* Relate!’

‘She tore it up,’ said Olwen, carefully brief.

‘Tore it up? *Mon Dieu!*—tore it up, destroyed it? This book?’

‘Not the book.’ The fish well and truly hooked, she proceeded expectantly. ‘Tore the pages out of the book, Ma’am, pulled out some of the papers from the bunch—’

‘Very well, and then—?’

‘I heard Bethan coming past the nursery, I couldn’t stay, I had to leave the window...’

‘So—is that all?’ said Madame, controlling a deep disappointment. She shrugged hugely. ‘That is not so much after all.’

‘No, Ma’am,’ said Olwen, with downcast eyes.

‘There is more? What more have you seen?’

‘Only, next morning,’ said Olwen, up high again, ‘Bethan came from the schoolroom with a dustpan and brush in her hand. “Is that ashes?” I says to her. “There’s no fire in the schoolroom. It’s summer.” And Bethan says—’

‘Says what, girl, for heaven’s sake?’

‘“No, no,” she says. “Just, Miss has been burning some papers in the grate.”’

‘I have in my drawer,’ said Madame, ‘a very pretty little piece of ribbon, Olwen—I have just thought how nice it would be to trim your Sunday bonnet. And I shall give you some shillings, three shillings perhaps; but half you must spend on a dozen hankersneefs—you shall take a time from your free afternoon next month to go and buy some. And continue to keep the watch upon Mees. One does not like to—*fouiller*: I think you say the peeping,’ said Madame piously, ‘but it is for the sake of the cheeldrain. You can listen, perhaps, if she tells the below-stairs anything about the books...’

Miss, however, told nobody anything about the diaries—or nothing at least, of what pages she had removed from them; not even Hil. She did suggest to him, however, an excellent

new plan to further their enquiries. An old woman was ill in the village. Would it not be nice if the children were encouraged, now that they were seven years old and might be taught to carry out such duties, to visit the poorer tenants, with appropriate comforts? Their mother, no doubt, before her illness, would have carried out such lady-of-the-manor visitations and her mother-in-law before her and so to generations back. The general gossip of the parish might well be productive of an anecdote most valuably adding to the outcome of their investigations. The affairs of the manor impinged very directly upon its tenants, and such people had long memories; she wondered that she and Hil had not thought of it before. *He* might fall into easy gossip with the men. She and the children could start with this particular sick old woman. Who knew what memories might be evoked of past lives and deaths?

‘Do you suppose Madame would concede a drop of broth for us to carry to her, by way of introduction? We could represent the propriety of the children taking on such little tasks...’

‘We won’t worry The Walloon,’ he said, laughing. ‘Bron will smuggle some out to you—she makes a famous broth, and a suitably nourishing custard...’

‘Bron?’

He corrected himself, laughing again. ‘Bron! I mean Menna, of course. Bronwen is her second name; they occasionally call her by it. By any name, she’ll certainly oblige you as to the old woman, and you know how those ones love to dilate on birth, marriage and death.’

‘Especially on death. Such women seem positively to revel in discussion of other people’s departures from this life.’

‘It’s their only excitement,’ said Hil. ‘Birth is common

enough, a great deal too common for most of them, poor souls; and marriage too often a mere scrambled joining-together, under the parental eye. But death—death is a shared emotion, we all face it, we all dread it; within the parish it entails some ceremonial which all may attend, a gathering-together afterwards among those who can afford it, for the “baked meats”. And death among the gentry—well, that must be quite a special excitement for them: the fine hearse brought over from town, and the horses with their plumes, the flowers and the grand mourning dresses, all the lords and ladies come from half across the county to pay their last respects. And it’s the custom of Aberdar on such occasions, to subscribe to a gathering (which, however, they do not themselves attend) in the village hall.’ He shrugged. ‘Quite a jolly outing, as they say. Everything but the seaside.’

‘Oh, Hil! I think they have more feeling in the village than that? These poor young Hilbourne wives; dead in childbirth, early widowed or losing young children—’

‘Yes, yes, I say nothing against the people. The Manor is very good to them: compared with many, they’re well taken care of, and they’re grateful. I only meant that such things aren’t soon forgotten, the deaths and disasters especially; and it’s death and disaster, alas, that you and I, in the enquiry, are interested in. Anyway, let’s hope that this particular sick old woman has a conveniently long memory; and of matters that count.’

Pages of an old diary, torn out and destroyed. A handful of letters and accounts, torn up and destroyed... That this particular sick old woman would certainly have just such a memory as he described, it apparently did not occur to her present benefactress to mention. This particular sick old woman—in a neighbouring village, in fact, not even

their own—though long retired, had been for many years the local midwife.

And suddenly—drama. A letter arrived addressed directly to the Manor, in the recognisable hand of Sir Charles Arden who had written the original recommendations which had got her the post; and, very pale, Miss Tettyman crept to the bedside of the Squire. ‘Forgive me, sir, but I must leave you. If only for a little while—’

So thin and haggard, lying there on his couch by the bedroom window, with the peak of his bent knees fallen sideways, for lack of strength, against the sofa-back. ‘Oh, dear God!—are you going?’

‘For just a little while, sir. I’ll return.’

‘You will? You *will*?’

‘Oh, sir—yes. Yes, I will.’ But her voice strengthened to a new purpose. ‘I will indeed, sir, I promise it.’

‘When can you return?’

‘Just a matter of a few days, perhaps. I will try. But they are—there is great trouble at Greateaks. I must go to them.’

‘It is only this,—that if you don’t return soon, very soon...’ His thin shoulders rose and fell in the ghost of a shrug. ‘There is not much time left for me,’ he said.

Tears filled her eyes. She knelt down by the couch and took his wasted hand in her own and kissed it, laying it for a moment against the unscarred cheek.

‘I’ll come back to you—and to the children,’ she said. ‘I promise it.’

‘It is of such very great importance to them. And to my peace of mind.’ He hesitated. ‘I had been going to—I had thought of asking you...’ But he released her. ‘You are in a fever to go to where, also, you’re needed. Just so that you

come back!’

‘I’ll come back,’ she promised. ‘I’ll come back.’

How stay away ever again from Aberdar Manor—where all her heart now lay? She scribbled a note to Hil, explaining the circumstances of their need for her at the Park, and within an hour she was gone.

More ashes, this time in the empty grate of the bedroom. ‘Come back?’ said Tante Louise, improvising rearrangements with the Squire for the care of the children. ‘She won’t come back. The wife is dying—Mees has gone to her paramour.’

‘Lady Arden dying? How do you know this, Louise?’

From the remnants of a letter, this time too hastily burned to have been totally destroyed: sufficiently, however, to have been to some extent misunderstood. ‘She—well, she said as much, let slip something to that effect—she will hardly remember, I dare say, that in her haste she did so. But now the wife dies—the lover at last is free.’

He closed his ears against it, shook his weary head. ‘Oh, Edouard,’ she said, speaking as she usually did with him, in French, ‘you never will hear a word against Mees. But she is one for the men, my dear! Even Hil, have you not seen with what eyes she looks at Hil?’ Now he did lift his head and stare at her, suddenly startled. She improved upon it. ‘And he too. All those hours they spend together...’ She shrugged. ‘Madame Menna will not like that too much, I dare say.’

‘Menna? And Hil? Menna is twice his age.’ But he regretted immediately having exchanged a word with her upon such a subject. ‘It is no concern of yours or mine. It is Miss Tettyman who is in charge of the children. She will come back to them.’

But Tante Louise had seen where she had touched him

on the raw. 'And to Hil?' she said; and when he did not reply, looked at him more closely and saw that he had fainted.

That day he was too weak but next morning he sent for Hil. 'She swears that she will come back—'

'She'll come back,' said Hil. 'Or she wouldn't promise.'

'You seem very sure.' He said cautiously: 'Does it mean anything to *you*, if she returns or stays away?'

'Well, of course. The children—'

'To you, James?' He had no words to waste. 'You know that... You could never marry her, you must never marry...'

The long, long history, traced back now through this means and that, built up into a family tree which, for very space upon the paper, excluded all but the tragedies. A new generation, flourishing two hundred and fifty years ago; the happy marriage, the full family. And then—the eldest son of that marriage, killed in the flower of his youth; Isabella, the widowed daughter, sitting so rigid in the niche in the ancient church with her stiff pointed hands, her dead baby lying across the lap of her robe. The boy-child surviving, had grown up, married and then—hardly yet into manhood, like his father had been killed instantly in the hunting field. His child brought up in the sorrowing family, had brought in a new wife from a fine healthy stock, only to fall with her first child into a *dérangement*, spending the rest of her long life locked away in the company of 'friends' whom no other person could see or hear, in a sort of terrible, mad contentment all of her own. Her child, in its turn...

'It is the curse upon the place, James, there is no happiness for any marriage in Aberdar. The line must end. And you are a Hilbourne, directly in line.'

'For God's sake, Edward, I must have some woman in

my life.'

'Then you must beget no children upon her.'

'What sort of manage is that?'

'For this sweet girl—no marriage at all.' He cringed away from the vulgarities of Madame Devalle; but... 'If she returns—'

'She will return.'

'That woman, The Walloon, says that she will not. She says that there is—another lover; who will now be free.'

'That emanates only from the ugly imaginings of a woman frantic with anxiety as to her own situation,' said Hil, steadily. 'If ever there was another whom she loved—well, we can't help loving, there need be no wrong in that if we don't give way to it. But if ever there were such a love, then I believe that it's over. She will return.'

'To you?' said the Squire.

'Perhaps. I have to admit to you, Edward, now, that I could pray on my knees that it might be so.'

'James, for God's sake! You can't bring her—and yourself—under the curse of this doomed line.' He paused, gestured feebly towards the decanter on the table beside him. Hil poured out a half glass of wine and held it to his lips. 'Rest a little, you're overtiring yourself.'

'No, no, it must be said now.' He closed his eyes for a few moments nevertheless and then with an effort resumed. 'I had been intending to discuss this with you, as once we did before, though at that time you said you cared nothing for her. There were reasons then against my marrying. Suppose I had recovered my strength... But that is now past hope. I have not very long to live. If I were to marry her, the children would have a mother; what else is to become of them?'

'You seem less concerned with *her* survival under the

curse,' suggested Hil, unable to keep the dryness out of his voice, 'when you consider it from your own point of view.'

The Squire looked at him sadly. 'Ah, my poor James! Do you not think what I must feel for you? But—this is for the children; and here is what seems to me. A marriage to me would be no marriage—there could be no children from it, to bring the doom upon her. Look here, at your papers. Who is affected? The young wives, the young husbands, the children. But she—'

'*She* is a nothing, who is to be used for the benefit of Lyneth and Christine?'

'She would be mistress of all these great estates, of all this wealth. She has much to lose, but she would have these ready-made children whom already she loves. She has something also to gain.'

'You have not considered,' said Hil, driven by his own bitterness to unwonted cruelty, 'that your wealthy young widow might very well marry again.'

'I have thought of that also,' said the Squire, sadly. 'I am not a fool, brother. But—such a marriage if it were outside the family, would not come under the curse. It would not be within this doomed Hilbourne line. Only one marriage could bring that about—to her destruction—'

'And to mine,' said Hil.

A long hour passed. The Squire lay back against his pillows, utterly spent and spoke no further word. Hil sat beside him with his head in his hands. When at last he moved, he rose and went over to the window and stood staring out at the summer greens, from the golden green of the willows, the emerald of the grass, to the dark evergreens beyond. He said: 'So there is only one way left to me. Only one way.'

'Believe at least that my heart breaks for you,' said the

Squire.

‘I must marry. I must have a woman in my arms. I must have warmth and companionship, I must have such love in my life as is left to me. And at the same time, put it out of my power to bring more Hilbourne children into this world.’ He came over swiftly and knelt down beside the couch and as that other had done, took the Squire’s frail hand and held it against his cheek. ‘Have no more fear,’ he said. ‘There is a way out.’

CHAPTER 10

MISS TETTERMAN, MEANWHILE WAS met at the station by Sir Charles himself, who in the darkness of the carriage put his arm about her shoulders and kissed the disfigured cheek. She put up her gloved hand to it. 'Oh, no—you must not!'

'I had rather kiss this scarred cheek, my dear, than the smoothest in all the world.' He sat back away from her, gazing into her face. 'How wonderful to see you—how good of you to come, and so soon!'

'Of course, I would come if you sent for me.'

'My heart of gold! But—you are well, Alys? You look so fresh-faced and blooming—you are not the same thin, sad girl who crept away from this place. And this spa where you went when you left here—'

'—sent there through your generosity—'

'What less could I offer you?—and such competence as you would accept. But, indeed they've done well with their treatment of the scar.'

'I put it out of my mind—most of the time. But you have never been out of my mind. Nor out of my heart.' And now she asked: 'Is her case hopeless?'

'So the doctors tell us: and they've been frank with her, she has demanded it. It will not be yet, not even very soon perhaps. But with the knowledge, she has changed. There will be no hard words now. She wishes to see you before she dies.'

Smiling faces greeted her, willing hands assisted her in alighting from the carriage. She stepped in through the familiar door into the great hall, marble flagged, went up the lovely graceful curve of the stairs. An elderly maid

waited upon her, all smiles; she took off her bonnet and cloak, tea was brought up to her there, with tiny sandwiches and a profusion of little cakes, 'Cookie remembers, Miss, how you used to like them. But, oh, Miss Alys—the poor mistress!'

'Sir Charles holds out little hope for her. But it won't be yet.'

'It is sad for him, poor gentleman. What will he do in his loneliness? Our darling Miss Charlotte gone and now there'll be nobody. But as to our own ladyship, Miss Alys, she won't be too sorry to go. She's never got over the accident. Our poor Miss Charlotte—I never did take to that horse-riding, but she was that wilful! And now you, Miss, left with this great scar. Not but what it's better than when you—when you left here. As to that—'

'There was a misunderstanding,' she said. 'That was all. And now I must go...'

To another death-bed. But as yet there was no outward sign of what was to be. Lady Arden reclined upon the day-bed in her boudoir but she was dressed, in a loose gown certainly, but with all her own old exquisite care. 'Oh, dear Alys! How good of you to come to me!'

She said, trying not to seem too stiff and cold: 'Of course, I would come when your ladyship asked for me.'

'I'm so sorry, Alys! How have I treated you—?'

'I have been looked after my lady. I make no complaint. Sir Charles—'

'Yes, he has told me now all his care for you after you left here. He sent you to the doctors at Cheltenham till your poor scar had sufficiently healed, and he has written to you constantly? You told them nothing, of course, of all this?—in your new place. I know my Alys: so loyal and discreet.'

'No, indeed, nothing. When curiosity grew, I asked him

to use an accommodation address. I came in the end,' she said, at last frankly smiling, 'to be suspected of harbouring an admirer. The Madame there, a Belgian woman, brought in when the children's mother died—'

'Ah, she was *jalouse*, I daresay! Of an old grandfather, did she but know it, seventy years of age!'

'He has been like a grandfather to me, my lady. You know that he gave me to bring away her ring, our darling's little "regard" ring, his last present to her—with her initials carved inside it, Charlotte Bell Arden, her lovely name.'

'She was named after him, and after her father. My husband was Charles too, of course—my dear lost love. Perhaps after all, I need blame myself not too severely, Alys, left a widow so young and then to have my own precious treasure killed in this terrible way. But my poor Alys!—your sweet, pretty face—'

'I think nothing of it, my lady. It was a small thing, if only I could have prevailed.'

'I suppose I have—resented it; that you should live while our darling died. And yet I know that you would have given your own life, I know that you risked your life. I believed—I wouldn't allow myself to un-believe, that you had been responsible for the horse bolting...'

'I wasn't even there, my lady. The groom was with her. I saw the horse tearing across the meadow, I rushed down the hill to intercept it. I had him by the bit but he was too strong for me, he reared up and I suppose his hoof must have struck me. I fell down unconscious...'

'I know, I know: this is what they told me but in my grief I must hit out at somebody. That I should have chosen you! But your generous heart will forgive me.'

'Of course.' But she said frankly: 'I was bitter: bitterly hurt by your—'

‘Ingratitude.’

‘I had offered my life; or rather, I’ll say that at that moment my life meant nothing to me. And as it transpired, though my life was spared, it was with a disfigurement that made it, for that time at least, almost worthless to me. After this to be reviled and rejected by you...’

‘How could you have understood—?’

‘I should have understood. I think in your place I might have done the same—in my grief, struck out wildly and savagely, wounding and destroying. I recognise it in myself.’

‘Well, yes. For all you pass through life such a quiet little dove, you have strong passions beneath the surface. Your dear old saintly father used to speak to me of it.’

‘I think it is true,’ she admitted. ‘In love and in war.’ To conceal the rise of colour in her cheeks, she rose from her kneeling position, found a chair for herself and sat down, composing her hands in her lap. It gave her time to re-slant the conversation. ‘Sir Charles has been so good, I have been so grateful to him; especially at first, it meant so much to me in my loneliness—kind letters, all the news, of yourself, of Greateaks, things going on in the village; and the little gifts, always with the same theme, remembrance—trifles that she had valued...’

‘He was always fond of you as we all were. And after that terrible day... You were right when you said that he has been like a grandfather to you.’ She hesitated, her voice altered a tone. ‘This was partly the reason why I’ve sent for you, my dear. Before the time comes for me to die, while I’m still able to think clearly and speak sense... Poor old man—bereft of his much-loved son, his heir, and then of the light of his eyes, the light of all our eyes, our darling—and now of myself, who, though only his daughter-in-law, have been to him like his own child. What is to become of him?’

She would not pretend to be stupid. 'Oh, my lady—I am so much needed where I come from now.'

'You have been there something more than a year, Alys. We have known you from your childhood in the village. You were in and out of this house, you were the little girl who filled in for Sir Charles between his son's marriage and our departure to a home of our own, and my return here with Charlotte after my husband died. From then on, you lived and worked in this house—if you could call it work, this loving service in a happy home. What is a twelvemonth compared with all that?'

'There are the children, they have no one else. And their father is soon to die, leaving them friendless.'

'So am I soon to die—leaving your kind old master friendless.'

'Would not Mr George then come to Greateaks? He is now the heir.'

'He won't come until he inherits. He is content on his own estates. So, Alys—'

'My lady, these are two little girls—'

'Who will grow up and marry and then where will you be? An ageing governess looking out for another post where things may be less congenial; and another and another. You might have married, my poor pretty Alys, but...' Her finger traced without repulsion the terrible scar. 'Let us make up to you for this. Return to your happy home here—you say that Sir Edward Hilbourne is soon to die—could you not have the children here with you, make it a second home to them? When my father-in-law dies you may return with them to Aberdar if you must, but you could well remain here. George Arden will take over, but he and his Kitty have always been so fond of you—might they not pass on to you the use of the Dower House—?'

She interrupted. 'Oh, my lady, I can't—I can't!'

It was said that this sickness altered the character and here was a character quick to an ugly anger, which had once been only gentle and sweet. 'What more do you want then?' And after a moment's thought: 'Ah, it is real wealth, is it?—not just a competence. It is marriage—a brief year or two, he won't long survive these blows—and you a rich widow, the Dower House at your disposal...'

(She was not doing too badly, little penniless Miss Tetterman, with her humble background and her poor, scarred face. Here at her feet, wealth and a title; and, though she might not yet be aware of it, the possibility that a few brief weeks, days even, of unfulfilled wedlock might yet make her mistress of estates ten times the size of Greatoaks Park! But...)

But... Oh, my love, she thought, my only-ever and forever love, my shining one!—what wealth and grandeur would compare with what you might one day offer me? A true love, a true marriage, a home that would be truly mine, our children and the—release of this desire, this craving for your arms about me, this sickness of my longing for you! She said at last: 'That you should suspect me of greed, of a sort of blackmail, my lady, is simply to revert to your earlier low opinion of me. You are ill, and I won't let myself resent it as I might. The simple truth is that... There is—there is a man—'

'A man! *You* have a lover?'

She put her hand to her scarred cheek. She said with angry pride: 'Of course, it is impossible to suppose that any man could since I am become—have made of myself—a thing so revolting that none could bear even to look at me...' Lady Arden cried out in horrified repudiation, but she over-rode her. 'It may be that you are right; it may be that I

am not loved and must wear out my heart in longing. But at any rate, I won't remain here to be taunted for the very sacrifice I made for your sakes. I will go where there is no cruelty except from one or two whom I may despise.'

Tears, pleadings, a total self-abasement. 'Alys, forgive me, forgive me! my situation is so cruel, dearest, forgive me if I say cruel things...' She consented at last to remain the few days she had promised to Sir Charles. 'But no word shall be spoken of my future wherever it may lie: but reconcile yourself to the fact, my lady, make what arrangements you can—it will not lie here.' Very sick and weary, she retired to her room: four days later, forced herself to genuinely loving farewells and with a heart uplifted in hope, started back for what to her had now become home.

Now no pony-trap met her at the station, but the family carriage with Sir Edward's two beautiful bays; and, to her alarm, Dr Meredith was there and old Mr Johnson the family lawyer. She gasped out: 'The Squire?'

'His condition is grave. We will explain while we go.' As the carriage started up, the doctor repeated: 'Very grave. A matter of days, a day or two perhaps, hours perhaps.'

'He had a relapse?'

'He has been fading steadily. From what cause, I don't pretend to know. Ever since that blow on the head when the door fell back against him...' He shook his head, bewildered. 'It is a strange family. So much remains unexplained. But Mr Johnson wishes to speak to you.'

'The Squire lies on his death-bed, Miss Tetterman. All arrangements are made—the Vicar is with him now, a new will has been drawn up ready for his signature; he is desperately ill but Dr Meredith and I attest to his being of

sound mind, there can be no later complications. Sir Edward wishes you to marry him before he dies.'

She cried out in desperate repudiation. 'I couldn't! I couldn't!'

'For God's sake, girl—what have you to lose?'

The old, hopeless merry-go-round of argument. She said flatly: 'I am in love with another man.'

The lawyer's head fell forward in a gesture of defeat. He had known and cared for the family for many years. The doctor said, crisply: 'In a matter of hours, my dear young lady, you will be a widow.'

Mr Johnson looked up again. 'Not so fast! There is no pretence but that the marriage would be for any reason but the benefit of the two children: to give them a guardian. What use, if she is then to marry elsewhere and leave them?'

'She would be their step-mother. She might take them with her.'

'He is absolutely adamant that they must not alter their residence, they must not—ever—leave Aberdar Manor.' But after a moment, the old man said slowly: 'I wonder if I might guess, Miss Tettermann—that your attachment need not bring about any move from Aberdar?'

'Ah? Well? Might you not be tempted then, my dear,' said the doctor, 'to eat your cake and have it?'

'To do a great, great kindness,' said Mr Johnson. 'To give these children their only chance of security, to send a good man in peace to his death, instead of in torment, and in due course to find your own happiness with no sort or kind of blame attaching to you, in the eyes of any man who might love you. And the man I am thinking of—surely he, who cares so deeply for the Squire and these two little girls—surely he would be the first to urge you to this course, at

whatever temporary sacrifice to yourself and him?’ As the carriage drew up at the door of the Manor, he implored: ‘At least before you refuse this request, speak to—this man: discuss it with him!’

The house looked very squat and heavy after the austere beauties of Greateaks Park and the chill as she entered the hall came as almost a shock. The cobweb hands that just occasionally had seemed to touch her face now brushed roughly against her cheek, it seemed as though for a moment the wound broke open and bled again. And with its bleeding, her heart bled also, a bitter bile of the old resentment and rage at the treatment that had been meted out to her when that wound was new. ‘*You? You* have a lover?’ Lady Arden had said to her in astonishment, and, ‘It may well be,’ she had replied, ‘that I have been made into a thing so revolting that no man could bear to look at me.’ That one man had looked at her and with eyes of love, she could not bring herself to doubt and yet now found herself questioning, almost with resentment,—‘or is it only with eyes of pity?’ The children greeted her rapturously but she found herself oddly unable to respond and they fell back, hurt and puzzled. ‘It is only that I am so cold,’ she said, but felt that she spoke irritably. ‘I have taken some chill...’

The doctor came downstairs. Over their heads, he said to her: ‘A decision must be made very soon.’

In the carriage she had been filled with kindness towards the dying man, not entirely repudiating within her own mind the proposal that would release his soul in peace. Now with those icy hands bruising her face, she found herself feeling only an angry rebellion that once again she was to be sacrificed. ‘Well, Doctor, I will do as you ask; I will talk it over with—that one I spoke of. But I promise

nothing.' Puzzled herself, and troubled, by the sudden change in her emotions, she wrapped her shawl again about her. 'I will go now,' she said. 'But keep your hopes low. I am not a heifer to be dragged from one altar to the other...'

Little Miss Tetterman, beloved Tetty, so loving and ever kind: what hidden force—it seemed from the moment she had entered the house—had brought her to so ugly a bitterness.

But free of the chill in the house, she felt herself grow warm again; looked back in astonishment at the revulsion in her feelings during the past half-hour, felt her heart again in its tender glow at the thought that in a moment she would be with her own true love. Whether or not he would agree to the proposed marriage—for a few brief hours—to his dying brother, she hardly knew. He loved his brother deeply, only a half-brother though he might be, and illegitimately so; and the enormous benefit to the children must count for a great deal in his mind. The thought occurred to her that such a marriage might, through the laws of consanguinity, preclude their own; the lawyer had not mentioned it, but he might well be unaware of the relationship. The marriage would be one 'in name only', demonstrably unconsummated—would that make a difference? But she must leave it to him to decide; and, at least, in a very few minutes she would know once and for all, that she was loved. For she would not deceive herself; she knew, she knew that it must be so.

At his house, if he were not about the estate, he would be in his office. And he was there, sitting at his big desk, all set about with tidy heaps and sheaves of papers and books. His fine hands played with a pencil, his head was bent, staring down at the unmarked sheet of white blotting paper in its leather holder. Her heart turned over, sick with that

wild upsurge of passion that nowadays ever assailed her at the very thought of him. She said softly: 'Hil!'

The pencil snapped across. He leapt to his feet, confronting her, and his face was deathly white. She faltered: 'I came to—I have something to—to tell you, to ask you—'

He almost cried out. 'Don't say it, don't speak it! First I must... I have to tell you... Since you went away, I have been married.' He fell silent, he looked as though he might faint.

Now she also was terribly pale, her hands clapped across her mouth, staring at him. 'Married?'

'To Menna,' he said. 'I was married this morning, to Menna.'

She repeated again, stupefied: 'To Menna?'

'You had better know it all,' he said. 'It ended but... Menna... She had been for the past several years, my—woman.'

Beautiful Menna, with her soft, deep bosom, her soft white rounded arms; whom she had heard him call, as though by a slip of the tongue, Bronwen. Bronwen, who in the happy innocence of the children's Christmas party had sung—against his protest—that song he had composed—had composed for *her*. 'Bronwen, my *cariad*, my snowy-breasted swan...' She stammered: 'You have been... You and she have been—lovers?'

'I am a man who—who can't live without a woman. Until I knew you—'

'And now you have married her?'

'For reasons—'

She said quickly but even as she spoke she recognised that it could not be true; and yet, for what other reasons? 'A child..?'

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘She’s past child-bearing. Indeed, it’s just because of that...’

His voice continued but she did not hear him. Her mind was in her room upstairs in the Manor house, where she had sat one evening, tearing a page from an old book, wrenching across a handful of papers, letters and accounts, putting a match to them, beating the wrinkled black fragility into a tiny heap of ashes: was in a cottage room, with a dying old woman babbling out the secrets of fifty years as the local midwife. Her hands ceased their trembling, clenched themselves into white claws, her dead white face grew grim and rigid, it was almost as though in her own throat she heard the death rattle of her love. And cold, cold!—piercing her, enfolding her, a sort of black ice seemed to fill all her heart and mind.

‘As a fine tree, split by the lightning flash,’ her old father had said to her, never dreaming of the lightning flash that might yet strike his daughter down, ‘may grow to one side of the river fork, now fresh and sweet and green—to the other, dark and dry,’ so now her whole being poured itself into the blackened side of the riven tree. And the cold was there, the cold, like an icicle driving itself deep down into her heart, driving into her mind one monstrous decision. Those old papers torn up and destroyed... She said with slow deliberation: ‘You have not been by any means the lady’s first lover?’

‘She has never concealed it from me. There was a child.’

‘By your own father. Before you lay with her, so did your own father? She being then a girl, sixteen years of age, living in the village: who later came back as servant maid here?’

‘It was all so long ago.’

‘Having born a girl child which was taken away immediately from the mother and brought up elsewhere?’

‘She has no idea where the child is now.’

‘She need not look far,’ she said grimly and could hardly believe that her own voice spoke. ‘For her sake, to confuse future search perhaps, and distress to all... she was deceived. The child was not a girl. The child was a boy.’ And moving away from him, turning away from him forever, she glanced back and said with a smile of terrible triumph: ‘I hope you will be very happy together. You and your—woman—and now your wife. She is your mother.’

Down at the house they were waiting, everything ready in anxious expectancy. She took the frail hand in her own cold hand, a word was spoken, a look bestowed upon her of heartbreaking gratitude: and two hours later, the widowed Lady Hilbourne walked down the broad staircase of her Manor home and issued her first command. ‘Madame Devalle—you will at once dismiss the cook and set about finding another.’

CHAPTER 11

SHE WAS EXHAUSTED. 'I will speak to the staff in the morning,' she said to Tomos, summoning him to stand before her in the small room that the Squire had used for such business as was not conducted with Hil in the estate office, unconnected with the house. 'Tonight, the children are to be told nothing, tomorrow I shall explain it all to them. Meanwhile, except for Bethan, nobody is to approach them; inform the staff of that.' And up in the nurseries she kissed the children, forcing herself to tenderness, and said only that Papa was too unwell tonight, even for the goodnight visit, and she herself so weary after her long journey that she would let Bethan put them to bed and just spend the evening quietly alone. To Bethan she gave orders. No hint was to be given of any changes in the house and nobody, *nobody* was to be allowed to speak to them. This included Madam, if she should make any attempt to see them. 'But, Miss, if she insists?'

'I am "my lady" now, Bethan, if you please. And as to Madam, you will find that she won't insist. Just tell her what I have said.'

'Yes, Miss—m'lady,' said Bethan with a scared little bob.

In the drawing-room, she found Tante Louise in a state of almost total disarray. She stood in the doorway. 'Has that woman gone?'

'She had left the house already. *Mais, je ne comprends pas—*'

'There is no need for you to understand. I'll speak to you tomorrow. Meanwhile, I want to be left alone—I shall

sit in the library.'

'In the Squire's room?'

'Do you suppose he will rise from his deathbed and protest—as to where his wife chooses to situate herself? Have a tray sent to me there. Some soup—' But Menna would have prepared the stock from which the soup would be drawn. 'No, no soup. But whatever small cheese-dish the girls can prepare, and a slice of fresh bread from the bakery—a fresh loaf, understand, from the bakery: and a glass of claret. Attend to it now, please. And meanwhile, nobody sees or speaks to the children, except Bethan alone; attend to that also.'

'*Eh bien*—it is evident,' said Madame in her own tongue, speaking her thoughts aloud, confident of not being understood, 'that the upstart is not slow to seize her position, to place herself above those who, up to now, have commanded *her*—'

'I am glad you appreciate it, Madame,' said her ladyship, in her own fluent well-accented French. 'I shall explain to you in the morning, exactly what will be your position—if I choose to keep you on, here. Meanwhile, the tray please, and without another word. I shall spend the evening in the library and I wish to remain there undisturbed.' She turned on her heel and walked out of the room, leaving the woman standing, gaping after her.

A girl brought the tray, with her small, timid bob curtsey. 'Thank you, Hannah. You may come back for it in half an hour: I shall leave it on the table outside the door—I don't want to be disturbed again.'

'But she *was* disturbed,' said Hannah, bringing back the tray later, to the kitchen. 'This time of night—who could it have been? People was talking in there, in the library.'

'No one has called,' said Tomos. 'Rod, you haven't

answered the front door?’

‘Haven’t stirred from the kitchen fire,’ said Roderic. He added: ‘And thankful we’ve all been to have it. Funny thing, a death in a house: the whole place feels suddenly—well, you could call it as cold as death.’ But whoever could it be, they all wondered, curiously, talking to her new ladyship there?—in that room, sacred to the Squire alone, who would tenant it no more.

Did she sleep? Did she dream?—sitting alone in that old library where once the Squire of Aberdar had slept and dreamed, who now lay dead upstairs. There came at any rate a heavy perfume that seemed to pervade the whole room, a rustle and murmur as of silk against silk, of velvet on velvet: a gleam in the shadows here and there, a shimmer of gold. And a whispering... A whispering...

(For—somewhere, of course, must there not be—a Shining? A radiance drawing up into its light the souls of the dead, as the sun draws up the dew. But between the coming of the dark and the coming to the Light—a world of veils, a shadowy maze through which the pilgrim soul must wind its way to that remote brilliance: a half-world in which it may yet be possible to turn back, to pierce through the darkness of death to a something of life again, however unreal and intangible. What, is eternity, if a moment of it, a few days, years, centuries, as the world counts time, may not be spent as the spirit wills, still in contact with the life-before-death?)

And if a curse has been pronounced, how not remain to see that curse put into operation, generation after generation? How not come back? And in that room, many generations ago, a curse had been pronounced, an anathema. ‘Our curse upon you—upon you and upon all

generations to follow you... Never again... Never again...'

'Only a Hilbourne could understand,' that young girl was to say long years ahead, 'only someone of the Hilbourne blood.' Her new ladyship might not be of the Hilbourne blood, but she was a Hilbourne now. Whether or not she knew it at the time, she had entered the house that afternoon a Hilbourne bride—and from the maze of grey veiling, those cold hands had reached out to her, influences ugly and malign seized upon her uncomprehending mind and heart. Up there on the hill above the house was the new home of another who had also that day become, in name, a Hilbourne—beyond their grasp, who could haunt only within the walls of the Manor, but to be reached by a messenger, helpless to resist, to lift the sword that would slash across all hopes of happiness for either. 'Beware the black shrivelled fork of the riven tree!' her father had said: when the lightning flash came, ghostly hands had been at work already—guiding her towards the dark.

Lady Hilbourne wrote a note next morning, addressed to the outside office. 'I understand that you gave a promise to the Squire before he died that you would remain here on the manor and run the farms and estate. To this I agree. For the future, submit to me on paper, regular and detailed records of all business conducted in respect of it; and note that I am now mistress here and everything shall be exactly as I decree. For the rest, never seek to communicate with me in speech or in any other way, and never ever again come into my presence. As to Christine and Lyneth—their cousins are now joint guardians, under myself; their legitimate relatives, that is. I wish that you should gradually, with as little pain to them as possible, withdraw from familiarity with the children. I shall explain to them that I have had

some grown-up disagreement and am no longer “friends” with you. That is all.’ But in fact it was not quite all. She added: ‘Supposing you should feel inclined to rake up your late father’s history and that of his “victim”, do not trouble yourself. I came upon it in the course of other investigations which I then shared with you and, intending at the time only to protect from further curiosity the names of those concerned, your own among them, I destroyed the evidence. The old woman who confirmed it was dying and is now in her grave. For myself, you may feel safe from any danger that I shall ever again soil my lips by referring to it. This is all I have, or ever shall have, to say to you.’ She signed her new initials: A.H.

He replied very briefly. ‘I shall continue on the estate as my half-brother wished. I shall continue to offer to his children such protection and care as I can, as he also wished. That I shall ever do them harm, that I shall ever so much as mention your name to them, is outside the question; but I will not refuse them my friendship. Meanwhile, I take leave to remind you of his two last injunctions: First, that no effort be made to remove them from the Manor. Secondly, that they shall be so brought up that there is no danger of their ever in the future marrying, and so bringing down upon a new generation whatever curse is upon this branch of the Hilbournes.

‘For the rest, God knows your wish coincides with mine—that you and I need never for the rest of our lives, confront one another again.’

‘I take leave to remind you...’ Enough in itself to turn her mind to a black perversity.

She tore the sheet across and threw it into the fire.

Madame Devalle came to her in abject fear for her own

future. 'I suppose, Mees, if now you are the mistress here—'

'I *am* mistress here. And my title is Lady Hilbourne. To you in future, it will be "my lady".'

'*Oui, Madame*—yes, milady. But now, then—you speak of the future... Sir Edouard *m'a promis...Je n'ai pas aucune place*, Mees—milady. Nowhere for to go.'

'Who asks you to go? What Sir Edward promised will be carried out. But you are no longer the grand lady, Madame, issuing orders and undertaking nothing more. The cook, you tell me, has duly departed?'

'*Mais, encore, ma chère, cette excellente Menna—pourquoi* —?'

'Madame, understand—to you I am not "my dear". And as to why?—there will be no more whys. That I speak, is sufficient. But the fact remains that by reason of her long employment here—in one capacity or another,' said her ladyship with an unlovely curl of her lip, 'she has more or less had the running of the house. Her replacement cook—will cook. Her place will be in the kitchen. All other duties will now fall to yourself—if you want to remain, you remain as housekeeper, responsible in everything to me. If Tomos and the rest of the staff wish to remain under the new circumstances, they may do so, as long as I am satisfied with them. Otherwise they are welcome to leave. As to Olwen, however—dismiss her at once. Pay her the very least that is owing to her and turn her out of the house. We will no longer harbour any spies of yours.'

It did much for her sick heart to see the woman standing there humbly, her large, ugly face grey with anxiety. 'You had better take a chair, Madame. I wish to get matters straight with you. As to the children, all will remain exactly as it has been, they will be entirely in my care.' She spoke now and for the future always to Madame in French.

‘I shall move my rooms, however. Bethan may sleep in my present bedroom and attend to them during the night—reporting to me for any instructions. I shall choose a bedroom and boudoir for myself in the main part of the house. And for you—you may remove to quarters more suitable to a working housekeeper. And set yourself up an office, also, as things were before the household fell under the control of—the kitchen. Consult me when all is decided, and I’ll see if I approve the arrangements.’

Madame, her gooseberry eyes a-goggle, her hand clapped to her mouth. ‘Such French, such fluency! All along, you have understood everything I said?’

‘All along. A pity you didn’t make yourself aware of it, Madame, isn’t it? You might not now find yourself reduced to the situation of a mere upper servant which when I first came, you would have assigned to *me*.’ She waved a cool hand in dismissal. ‘You will have your meals served to you in future in the housekeeper’s room. The children will take all theirs with me in the dining-room.’

‘In the housekeeper’s room? I am to eat alone, in the housekeeper’s room?’

‘Unless you prefer to be with company, in the servants’ hall?’

Madame stood her ground a moment longer. ‘I think, my lady—that this is rather more than any woman should be asked to accept. If I am to be treated this way—I can hardly remain here.’

‘You are entirely welcome to depart,’ said the kind, sweet, pretty-spoken little Miss Tettermann of twenty-four hours ago.

Olwen came cringing to her, weeping, creeping. ‘Miss—Madam—my lady—don’t send me away! I have nowhere to go, nowhere, nowhere.’

Her ladyship sat now at the elegant desk in that drawing-room which with such exquisite taste Madame Devalle had furnished—for herself. ‘Presumably you have friends—turn to them to help you.’

‘Miss—my lady—I haven’t a friend in the world.’

‘No friends? Such a charming, happy-natured, appreciative young woman as yourself? If I thought you could ever speak less than the truth, I should hardly believe you.’

‘I’ve had a hard life, my lady. All hands seem against me—’

‘This hand is against you,’ said her ladyship, lifting up her own. ‘And for very good reasons. So be out of my sight: I care not two farthings where you go. But first—what is that paper in your pocket?’

‘My lady—?’ But she handed it over. Lady Hilbourne took the sealed envelope. ‘What is this?’

‘Madame wrote me a recommendation, Madame—’

As a sneak and a spy? She tore the note to pieces. As to such attributes, I can write you an even better. Madame has only set you to work: it is I who have felt the results. You will take no recommendations from Aberdar Manor.’ She rang for Tomos. ‘The pony-trap at once. Get this girl into it and instruct Owain to set her down at the railway station and so we are done with her. I think no one is likely to miss her?’

‘Anybody can play at being respectful,’ Tomos had said to the staff, gossiping about the governess, newly-arrived. ‘I do it myself, when I must.’ Now he stood with suitably downcast eyes. ‘I believe she has very little money, m’lady, and no friends. Have I your permission to arrange for her at least somewhere to go?’

‘What do you care where she goes? Do you not know

the part she has played here?—creeping and spying, listening at doors, tale-bearing...

He realised his head and his dark eyes, bright with his bright Welsh intelligence, looked back into hers. 'Some people, m'lady, well, they seem to be born—not loveable. But the Squire—with your permission, m'lady—the Squire, he used to say that when we've done with charity and even with mercy, there still remains something he called compassion. He would say that compassion is to care for those whom one needn't love nor even like; nor even approve of.' As she sat silent, looking back at him, he ducked his head in a sort of bow and asked quietly: 'Is it your wish, my lady, that I should see that the girl is treated with—compassion?'

If for a moment her own warm heart responded, now there were icy hands, always, to drag it down into cold depths of the malignity of that old anathema. Balked by the Squire's death from the usual pattern of marital disaster, the curse turned itself inward upon her, the bitterness was of her own making. She said coldly: 'No, it is not my wish. However, if you must be sentimental—very well.' But as he took the wretched girl's arm and pushed her towards the door, she called him back. She said, in the new hard voice that for the rest of her life she was to use with all but the children, 'The rest may do as they please, and welcome to go if they will. But as to yourself, Tomos—do you go or stay?'

'I'll stay, my lady,' said Tomos and for a moment lost something of his vaunted false subservience. He looked her straight in the eye. 'I think you have need for me here.'

The weeks passed, it was autumn. There came letters from Greatoaks Park, beseeching, imploring. The sick woman's

longing had become an obsession. Dearest Alys was rich now, mistress of a great house and estate, that was all understood; but did she not owe something still to those who for so long had been all her family? No stipulations should be made, nothing further demanded, if she would but bring the little girls with her to all the lightness and grace of this lovely place, so much better for them, surely, than the gloomy old manor house she had described? 'Dear Alys—I am soon to die!'

And after all, was she not mistress now, indeed, free to do as she pleased and with control over the children? The constant presence of one, unseen, unheard, uncommunicative except for brief, formal notes about business matters, hung nevertheless like a shadow increasingly oppressive over her sick and lonely heart... To escape—to leave this place for ever and lead her life with her darlings in the care of the dear old man, in the freedom and sunshine of that much loved home..! I need not move the children altogether from the Manor, she thought; if I seem only to be going for brief visits, if now and again I bring them back here—could the house then revenge itself upon me or on them? And anyway... A door opened carelessly, an injury more severe than at first appreciated... Am I to be kept prisoner here all my life, out of superstitious dread? Are the children—?

She sent for them. 'A plan, my pets! Aberdar is so sad and lonely now, without Papa. How would you like to come with me for a visit to Greatoaks?'

A name to conjure with, familiar to them now through stories of her childhood in the vicarage close by, of her pupil, Charlotte, the girl that had 'grown too large'...'But could we take the dogs?'

'And could we take Ivory and Ebony?'

‘Oh, yes, the dogs, of course. As to riding—’ Her heart shuddered within her; she felt fairly sure that all but the carriage horses would be unacceptable now in the stables there. ‘But there is a great lake with a boat on it—’

‘A boat!’

‘—and a little island in the middle where we can row out for picnics.’

Ecstasy. But, ‘When could we come home?’

‘Well, as to that—we could see how long you wanted to stay.’

‘Only,’ said Christine, ‘we wouldn’t like to go away for too long, because of all the people here and especially Hil.’ And at mention of Hil, a question too oft-repeated: ‘Where’s Menna, Tetty?’

‘I’ve explained to you, Menna had to go back to her family in South Wales, her mother was old and ill.’

‘Christine remembers now that Menna told us she hadn’t got a mother any more. She died and that was why Menna came here to the village, and then later on she came to work at Aberdar. She did have a brother.’

‘Well her brother then, was ill: she had to go in such a hurry, we may not have got things right.’

‘And Olwen left. Did she go in a hurry too?’

‘I didn’t like Olwen and when I became the mistress here, I sent her away.’

‘You didn’t send Menna away, Tetty, did you? That wasn’t why you and Hil weren’t friends any more? Hil loved Menna.’

‘I’ve explained it all a dozen times. Now, no more about it, please.’

‘Well, it’s only—we’ve been thinking—’

‘Think about something else then. Do you want to go and stay at Greetoaks, and have picnics on the lake? And

there's a dovecote there, the doves come and sit on your hands and peck away at the grain...'

And yet her heart smote her—that corner of her heart that was left still under her own control. Am I doing this for my own sake, to get away from—him? Or for theirs? She knew that it was dangerous in the extreme, that even so half-and-half a plan went contrary to all their father's instructions as to their future; that by no foolish pretences would They be deceived—the unknown They who nevertheless held over them all, those threats from the Other World. Do I dare? she thought. Do I dare?

A note was delivered on the following morning, addressed to her in that well-known, once so much loved hand. 'I understand that you propose taking the children away, at least for a protracted stay. I beg you, do not remove them from this house. I remind you of what happened to their father when he went so far as even to contemplate such a step. By now you must believe in the threat to them, if they leave Aberdar.'

She left the note unanswered, immediately put aside all doubts: went ahead with preparations, wrote to Lady Arden that she would stay at least through the winter, see the old man over the days of sorrow that, alas, must come. Would arrange for care and companionship for him during such times as she must, with the children, return to Aberdar, dividing their time perhaps between the two homes, at least for the rest of Sir Charles's life. To her staff, she repeated only that she was leaving with the two little girls and did not know when they would return. That message, she was aware, would soon filter through to the house on the hill.

On the night before their planned departure, Bethan, dragging two screaming children, interrupted her sleep. 'Oh, m'lady, a fire! A fire in the nursery, the chair tumbled into

the grate, the wood caught alight, all the room in flames..!’

Bells ringing, feet scurrying, Tomos in control: a small conflagration, soon subdued. But the little girls wept and clung, and in the morning were heavy-headed and feverish. Overtired, over-excited... On the following day there was no improvement; on the third, she sent for the doctor. Nothing ailed them, no sort of diagnosis seemed forthcoming. ‘They are Hilbournes, my lady, the whole family seems prone to these mysterious maladies... Nothing for it but to wait patiently for their recovery.’ But the days passed and they tossed on their white bed, dull-eyed and listless, refusing food, rapidly losing weight.

Tomos came at last and stood before her, shifting uneasily, as she sat alone in the library, staring mindlessly ahead of her. ‘M’lady—sorry to disturb you. But we’ve been saying—saying in the hall, m’lady... The children... This is a strange old house; it seems like the house doesn’t want them to go, the same as it wouldn’t let the Squire take them, either. If—if you was to cancel the visit, my lady...’

The servants’ hall, indeed! She knew very well from whence, so carefully rehearsed even to the deliberate stumbling, the message came. ‘Oh, nonsense!’ she said. ‘Are the children to be kept prisoners at Aberdar by a lot of ignorant gossip among the staff? I’m surprised at you, Tomos. They were over-excited, caught chills, running about bare-foot, in their nightgowns, unattended in all the commotion. They’ll be well in a couple of days and I shall then use my own judgment—and nobody else’s—in taking them away as I’d decided.’ And you may repeat that message to the one who instructed you, she said in her mind, and let him know once and for all, that in all things I shall resist him implacably. ‘Very well, Tomos. That will do.’

‘Yes, m’lady,’ said Tomos but he did not immediately turn and go; only stood for a moment looking with his bright eyes into her face. He said at last: ‘If your ladyship will excuse me—is there a slight mark—’ his fingers indicated a spot on his own forehead—‘over your ladyship’s eye?’

‘A mark?’ She turned to the mirror which hung between two windows and, as the door closed quietly behind him, bent forward and peered into it.

And thought: There is no mark—no specific mark. Is *this* what he intended me to see?

The ravaged face, staring, glaring back at her. Sickly pale, and yet with a strange dark look as though a cobweb obscured the soft sheen of ivory: thin, eyes feverishly bright. The great scar gleaming bone-white across the hollow of the cheek. A face that had been filled with kindness and love, with nothing in it now but anger and bitterness. Is this me? Can this be me?—that girl that I was so short a time ago? Filled with hate, filled with cruelty, with rage and resentment—at the mercy of... At the mercy of... And she tore herself from the torment of that face looking out at her, flung herself down on her knees, crouched there, helplessly weeping. What forces are these that work within me, that will not let me be? In her mind she knew that his betrayal had been contrary to his own heart’s desire: had been on his part also, a sacrifice, to put out of his reach once and for all, the possibility of bringing into the world more children to suffer... To suffer as she suffered now. What forces compel me? she had asked herself—and knew that they lay in that malediction that had been pronounced so long ago upon the family of the Hilbournes of Aberdar. Why pretend?—why pretend no such thing exists? I *know* that it exists. I dreamed... I dreamed... But force her mind as she would,

she could not recall the dream. Could not recall those words cried out in wild vengeance for that young man robbed of his bride-to-be. Never again... Never again...

She rose at last and returned to the looking-glass and faced herself once more; and even as she gazed, the tears seemed to dry on her ravaged cheeks, the look of piteous helplessness to change back to one of bitter resolution. She moved away sharply, rang the bell, said to the manservant, attending, 'See to the fire, Rod, what are you about? This room is like an icehouse.'

She held out for two days more but on the third when they would soon be expected, she wrote the note that must destroy all her promises, and directed that a man make the journey, taking it to Greateaks by hand.

'Lyneth and me feel much better this morning,' said Christine the next day.

PART II

CHAPTER 12

MISS TETTERMAN HAD WORN, in a suitable modesty, her quiet greys and sepia browns. Lady Hilbourne made no change in her dress: richer materials, certainly, but that was all, and very stiffly and grimly as the years went by did she move through her days. No embargo was placed any longer upon the children's meetings with others of their age: comings and goings were frequent between the Manor and Plas Dar up on the hill across the stream; Lawrence Jones and their cousin Arthur, who spent most of his holidays there, were their constant companions. With Sir Thomas and Lady Jones, she was on terms of cool civility, she exchanged calls with such neighbours as must one day provide backgrounds for the girls' entry into society.

Beyond this, she had no friend or acquaintance in the world. To pained reproaches from Greatoaks Park at the time of the cancelled visit, she had replied that promises had been broken not by her own wish or will; but that since she appeared yet again to have lost favour in her ladyship's eyes, she would give up the unequal struggle, and that should be the end. She locked away in a drawer the loving gifts of the sad old man, the 'regard' ring, the small box with its enamelled forget-me-nots: with a face like iron, tore across and across the long-hoarded letters and threw them away. These fingers are not mine, she thought, as she wrenched at the folded pages: other hands direct my hands. I need make no apology. I am not in my own power.

'I foresee that a day will come,' Hil had said to her, 'when you will betray us—when you will destroy us all.' Little knowing what she did, she now clung, with all her

terrified heart, to what seemed the only redeeming feature in the breakdown of all her true personality, which she seemed powerless to prevent—her selfless devotion, her love for the two little girls.

That fatal love.

Meanwhile, however, a sort of alliance grew up between herself and Madame, arising from this subject of company for growing-up little girls. *‘Ce pauvre Edouard, c’était une idée fixe, que les petites seront élevées en solitude. Mais, enfin, ce n’est pas naturelle, il faut avoir des amis, comment faire de bonnes manages quand le jour est arrivé...?’*

And what more exquisite relief to that urban heart, than to embark upon the dressing and grooming and polishing of so enchanting a pair of dolls? So a conspiracy was entered into, as to party frocks for little girls, for growing-up little girls, for young ladies ‘arrived’; as to music teachers to be introduced, and dancing masters, art masters, all the rest—the lessons of Greateoaks had not been lost upon one now committed to the launching of pretty young husband-hunters into such world of fashion as existed in the great houses in the beautiful country on the borders of beautiful Wales. Orders went to the estate office for new carriages, for horseflesh capable of longer journeys; Ebony and Ivory must give way to larger ponies, supplanted at last by a pair of thoroughbreds suitable for elegant young ladies to go riding with their compeers. Tante Louise actually undertook a journey to Paris in search of the just-right dresses and bonnets and boots and little kid gloves. A lady’s maid replaced simple Bethan, equipped to accompany her mistresses, once ‘out’, on over-night visits for parties and balls; fine uniforms were designed for Owain, promoted to head coachman now, and a footman, to place carriage rugs and open doors, to deal with bonnet boxes without turning

them upside-down; both groomed by sharp lessons from her ladyship in conducting themselves correctly on the box of the carriage, or in servants' halls other than their own...

And so at last a day came...

'Oh, Tetty, I know I told Tante that I wanted the white lace dress to be mine—but now, tonight, I *would* rather have the one with the flounces. Christine, you have the frilly lace one and I'll let you have the rose-wreath with the pink ribbons that was supposed to be worn with the other...'

'But it belongs with it, Lyn. It would be all wrong to separate them. And we did agree that I should have the lace dress.'

'Oh, darling, but I love it, I adore it—just for this once, just on our coming-out night, let me have my own way!'

'It's my party too,' said Christine.

'Oh, Tetty, do ask her!'

'You must make up your own mind, Christine.'

'Tante Louise—?'

'Well, but Lyneth...*Mais, encore*—for that matter, Christine, *les—comment on dit?*—*les* frills on you would be so pretty, *ma chérie*. And then, yes, with the frills will go so very nice the little wreath avec des roses, Lyneth is so kind to give you this. And the small little one with the flowers made of feathers, that will suit Lyn, it go with the dress quite all right. Come, Christine, it is nice to make the little sacrifice, *non*? And always you are so kind...'

So spineless, thought their stepmother. Why can't the foolish child stand up for herself? But when Christine fought back in the matter of the pink satin slippers to match the rosebuds in the wreath, she came down in judgment on the side of their being worn with the white feather headdress. 'If Lyneth comes downstairs all in white without a touch of colour, good heavens, they'll think she's a ghost—' She

corrected herself quickly, ‘—a bride. And that reminds me, darlings—not more than two dances with Lawrence, Christine! And not more than two for you, Lyneth, with your cousin Arthur! It is not *comme il faut*.’

‘I don’t *want* more than two with Arthur,’ said Lyneth, pettishly. ‘I’d much rather dance with Lawrence.’

‘Well, well, my pets, Lawrence and Arthur aren’t the only two young men in the world. There’ll be queues lining up to fill in the programmes of the Belles of Aberdar.’ She glanced rather anxiously, nevertheless, from one sweet, lovely face to the other. For one of the Belles of Aberdar, she knew all too well, there *was* only one young man in the world: and what Christine wanted today—already Lyneth was beginning to lay claim to.

Dancing, dancing in his arms—in the lacy white dress with the little wreath of pink roses perched on her shining head...‘Oh, Christine, I could dance like this, holding you in my arms, for ever!’

‘Oh, Lawrence...!’

‘Would you get tired of it, Christine, would you grow weary of it—dancing only with me? Dancing through all this evening, only with me?’

‘Not just for this evening, Lawrence. I’ll never be tired of you.’

‘Christine—if I could ask you! But my father... You are only seventeen, my father says that’s too young for any girl to make up her mind.’

‘Your father doesn’t know much about girls,’ she said, smiling up at him. ‘I made up my mind when I was six years old.’

‘I think I did too. Well, when I was ten, perhaps. Except that, you and Lyn being so much alike, when one was a

little boy it was difficult to know...'

Did he know now? 'Oh, Tetty,' she said, subsiding on to one of the little gold ballroom chairs, leaning her cheek for a moment against that stiff, unyielding shoulder which yet was a haven to the two only beings in the world she cared for, 'do you think he loves me? He says that when he was little, he couldn't make up his mind between me and Lyneth. But Lyn has Arthur, Arthur loves her and she has so many other admirers.'

'So have you many admirers, my dearest; quite as many as Lyn.'

'I don't want other admirers, I just want Lawrence.'

'Well then, you must put up a fight, Christine, mustn't you? A man, your Aunt Louise would say, will always want what is not easily available: he wants the peach that grows highest on the wall. You shouldn't place yourself where he may just reach out his hand and take you.'

'But so he *may* reach out his hand and take me. I can't play silly girls'-games, not with Lawrence.' But she glanced across the room to where the handsome dark head bent over the fair head with its coronet of white feathers, and felt her heart lurch in her breast. 'Tetty—you don't think Lyn is playing such games with Lawrence? *She* isn't playing at being the peach highest on the wall?'

Was Lyneth playing games? Lyneth who had always wanted what Christine wanted, only because Christine wanted it. And what Lyn wanted... But this is going too far, she thought. It means too much to Christine; Lyn can have any man she wants, she must leave Lawrence alone. He didn't really know his own mind, he was still such a boy; but she must see to it—however much she might wish for her favourite to have her own way—must see to it that for a jealous whim, Christine's faithful heart was not broken for

the rest of her life.

Christine's hands were clasped around her arm. 'Tetty—if you could speak to Lyn, if you could tell her, now, tonight, before it's too late! Not plead with her, that only makes her want things even more: but just tell her, forbid her to tease Lawrence and flirt with him... Lyn can always get her way, with everyone. But if you were just to tell her: she'd obey *you*—you know she would.'

Yes, she knew. Here was the moment—one word from her now, call Lyneth over and tell her quietly to behave herself... Lyn would obey. What, then, prevented her? What but that force which from somewhere outside her, that chill hand across her heart that over the long years still impelled her to the resistance which must spell disaster. For in the terrible days to come, she knew that even before Christine spoke, the wrong, the cruel decision had been made. Christine saying, blindly pursuing her own inward thoughts, 'Hil thinks so too; he said quite sharply to Lyneth that she shouldn't play games and try to take Lawrence away from me—' And she broke off, frightened. 'Oh, Tetty, I'm so sorry! I know I shouldn't mention Hil.'

Her mouth went stiff. 'Oh, but of course, my dear—if Hil has the matter in hand, let *him* speak to Lyneth.' And she detached her arm from the beseeching hands and moved sharply away. And the moment was gone.

Dancing. Dancing with Lyneth. 'You are as light as a feather, Lyn, in these little pink shoes. I feel as if I could dance with you like this for ever.'

'I have strict instructions, Master Lawrence, *not* to dance with you for ever. Not, in fact, more than twice. Besides, my cousin Arthur—'

'Oh, confound your cousin Arthur—!'

‘With all my heart. But there is also Sir Edwin Groome on my programme, and a splendid young blade called—Lord Something—’

‘He is merely the Honourable James; not a Lord at all!’

‘Well, the no-Lord Something then. How Tetty would exult, would he but make me a no-Peeress! Because even a no-Lord becomes at last a yes-Lord: doesn’t he?’

‘Do you care that he should? But you don’t—you say all this just to make me jealous.’

‘And are you jealous?’

‘No, of course not, you ridiculous girl!’ said Lawrence, stoutly.

‘Oh, Lawrence!’ A tear like a dew-drop twinkling in each lovely blue eye.

‘For goodness sake, Lyn, you don’t care a row of pins whether or not I’m jealous! Your heart is set on far greater heights than ever I could offer you. What price, for example, your future yes-Lord?’

‘It’s her ladyship’s heart that is set on the yes-Lords; and Tante Louise’s. There is no rein,’ said Lyneth laughing, ‘to their ambitions for the Twin Belles of Aberdar.’

He said with a sudden sinking: ‘You mean—Christine —?’

‘Why not Christine? She is full as much a belle as I am. And with much the same—ambitions.’

‘She speaks to me,’ he said slowly, ‘in a rather different key. She has almost let me believe—’

‘Good heavens, Lawrence, do you still not know when Christine and I are teasing you? We’ve been teasing you all our lives.’

‘Including this evening?’

‘Especially this evening—evidently,’ said Lyneth. And, joining her sister, sitting close under Lady Hilbourne’s wing,

she said laughing, 'I do believe Lawrence Jones is growing up at last! Positively, he has been flirting with me. He and our cousin Arthur, I dare say, have been rehearsing pretty speeches to recite to their various partners.' She looked down complacently at the pink satin shoes peeping out from beneath the white flounces. 'Imagine his exclaiming that he wished he could dance with me for ever!'

Their step-mother had been right, perhaps, in feeling impatiently that really Christine should put up more of a fight for herself. But the guileless heart confided, aside, to her sister: 'Did he really say that to you? He said the same to me and I—Lyneth, I believed that he meant it.'

'I'm ashamed to confess to you,' said Lyneth, biting on her under-lip, 'that I thought that he meant it to me, too.'

'How pale that child has grown,' said one of her neighbouring dowagers to Lady Hilbourne. 'They so easily get over-tired, these very young girls, especially with all the excitement of their own first ball. Do you think the time has come for me to gather my party and take them off home, and so start an end to this delightful evening?'

And certainly you have contrived it all very well, she thought, eyeing the stiff figure in the plain dress of heavy grey moiré with its matching shawl of magnificent heavily patterned Lyons silk, the severe coiffure, the absence—despite so much wealth—of any touch of jewellery. I suppose she learned her manners in the days of her governessing, and the Parisian aunt has added a bit of polish all round. Nevertheless, what a poker she is! However, poker or not, it was prudent to keep in with the upstart; the girls would be immensely rich and one had grandsons and cousins, and the grandsons and cousins of friends and indeed the welfare of all the County, to be considered. Heaven send that the boy from Plas Dar across

the river, hadn't captured already the heart of the heiress, as some were suggesting. Though for that matter, there he went with the sister on his arm... Or was it the sister?—yes, the elder twin was the one with pink roses in her hair. Seen together, it was not so difficult to mistake them; the other had a gentle, sweet expression—this one looked a proper little huzzy.

'Young Mr Jones looks much *épris* with his pretty partner?' she suggested, tossing a trifle of Stardust into the eyes of the presumably gratified step-mama.

'I hope the same may be said for other eligibles also,' said her ladyship, not batting an eyelid. 'Lawrence is a close neighbour; of course, they would be good friends.' To the offer of a move to end the ball, she responded, rising, 'Your ladyship is most kind but you may trust me to bring matters to a close when I judge the time ripe.' Stiff as a ramrod in her tight corseting, hooped skirt swaying, she moved calmly away.

'Put firmly in my place!' said the dowager to her neighbour, leaning across the vacated chair. 'You've got to respect her!'

'I daresay our respect will satisfy her,' said her friend. 'She is one who does not look for love.'

'And I daresay never has. Though it's faded now, in her youth that scar must have repelled all comers. May not that have embittered her? It must have ruined her life.'

'I know one or two who would be happy to have their lives ruined to the extent of a Hilbourne title and the manor of Aberdar,' said the other, laughing. 'And they not penniless daughters of some obscure curate, either, reduced to jumped-up nursery-maid.'

'Have a care—she may yet be step-mother-in-law to your grandson or mine—or to both,' said the dowager,

laughing too.

But in fact their grandsons were quite safe from any such fate.

They were coming very close, very close. ‘Tetty,’ said Lyneth, ‘do you think the guests are warm enough? The whole house seems cold tonight.’

Echoes of a dream, unremembered and yet closing in with wisps of half-knowledge in the guilty heart. She said irritably: ‘The house is old—it’s a cold house. Fires have been lit and I’ve enquired, everyone seems comfortable.’

‘Tante Louise says so too. But then she never feels the cold. Not this kind of cold. I suppose it’s just our special kind of cold.’

‘Nonsense, Lyn, you’re tired, that’s all. You’ve been dancing too much.’

‘Oh, yes, and it’s all been so wonderful!’

‘Yet you still must have something to grumble about. Considering all that’s been done for you—’

Christine, pale and fagged-out, trying to find her way back into favour. ‘Oh, no, it’s been perfect, Tetty, you’ve contrived it all so beautifully, you and Tante Louise...’

‘Yes, well as to your aunt, she does what she’s asked and is paid well enough for it.’

‘But she does it so beautifully,’ said Lyneth with a naughty wink at her sister. ‘Without her, we shouldn’t have been half so successful. Everyone is saying it’s the best managed ball of the season.’

‘Perhaps she had better take on the management of the whole house?’

‘Well, she does have the management, doesn’t she?’ said Lyneth, all innocent-eyed.

‘Why do you tease her?’ said Christine, as her ladyship

walked away with an angry flounce. 'She's tired too, I think, and I've been a fool and offended her. And she's done so much for us.'

'She's so jealous of the poor old Walloon!'

'Only when you praise her. You know you're her pet, why should you want to upset her?'

'And talking of pets,' said Lyneth, 'there goes Lawrence, the Plas Dar party must be going home. I must rush and say goodnight to him...'

Was it only the strangeness of the cold, that filled the little sister's heart with dread?

They toiled off up the path next morning, to tell Hil all about it. Nothing was said as to these expeditions; since their childhood declaration that they would accept no curtailment of their relationship with him, it had been tacitly accepted; his name never spoken between themselves and their step-mother.

Hil was middle-aged now—as, for that matter, Tetty was growing middle-aged, thirty-six years old and he moving towards forty: a tall, gaunt man with a haggard face and all the sweet colour gone from his red-gold hair. But they loved him still. What had happened at the time of their father's death, they had never understood—in recent years had come to suppose vaguely that there had been, perhaps, some understanding between himself and Tetty, which had been destroyed by the death-bed marriage. Why Menna had so precipitately disappeared had also remained a mystery—at the time, overwhelmed by all the events in the house, by their father's death, the over-throw of Tante Louise at the hands of a suddenly imperious new ladyship, they had scarcely had time to dwell upon the loss of beloved Menna. Nor would anyone speak of her and, in the total re-

adjustment of the household at the decree of an ex-governess, overnight promoted to rule over them all, The Walloon bustling about her new business in a resentful savagery of re-organisation, dismissing and hiring without sentiment, crashing like a hippo through all the old comfortable routines—there had been little time for anyone to think of the past, of sweet Menna with her easy, kindly ways.

In byres and stables and kennels also, and on the tenant farms, change had come about. Unrelaxed in fairness, a proper generosity, what the Squire would have called compassion—the bailiff, now sole manager, stalked with unsmiling blue eyes and had lost all his eagerness and joy in the work once so much loved. ‘I am responsible to a new over-lord,’ he would say in reply to intemperate pleading; adding quickly that Edward’s Hilbourne cousins, John and Henry, were the highest powers now, in the affairs of the manor lands. ‘But that’s not what he meant first-off,’ the staff would mutter behind their hands. ‘A new over-*lady* is what he meant first-off; and a harder task master than ever the Squire’s gentlemen-cousins, who never come near the place.’

They had come, however, soon after the Squire’s death. The widow received them with perfect coolness, making no apology at all for her present situation; entertained their ladies with calm civility, while the gentlemen talked in the estate office with Hil. Hil’s own situation in the family had been revealed to them, on a tacit understanding that while it invested him with a superior claim to remain on the estate, to special trust and a due respect, it need be no further referred to, outwardly or otherwise. To enquiries as to the comportment of the new Lady Hilbourne he had replied with his now accustomed brevity that he kept

himself too much occupied with the business of the Manor, he saw very little of her—he duplicated to her such information or question as he sent to each of them, preferring a reply in writing, which might be filed for future reference. For the rest, he knew his place and kept to it. And she knew hers.

‘We were thankful, Hil, to our cousin for taking off our hands the responsibility of orphaned children.’

‘No doubt that was the main purpose of his marriage.’

‘You know he had an idea to exchange homes with me? But wouldn’t entertain the idea of exchanging with Henry. He was a strange fellow. I sometimes wonder whether he wasn’t a little deranged? Anne Hilbourne... Too much intermarrying, it’s not a safe thing. This branch of the family have suffered from it, all down the line.’

‘The Squire thought the house situated too low, and itself not light and bright enough for children. I think he would not ask you to bring other children here, while he sought a better climate for his own.’

‘There was a great idea when he left us, of building for himself, on his own land.’

‘He returned home already in the early stages of his illness, and that idea was laid aside.’

‘That’s why we bring it up now. Will the new lady not consider it?’

‘I daresay she thinks it best not to unsettle them, their father being dead.’

‘He was highly set on it. Should we propose it to her?’

God forbid! thought Hil. We want no more slamming doors or mysterious fires, no more maladies incapable of diagnosis. Her own removal to a house more distant from the estate office and buildings, would deeply have eased his own comfort but with her would go the little girls and,

helpless in their affairs as he might be, he wished still to keep an eye upon them. 'I think she would reply that they are thriving quite well here. With the history of the Aberdar Hilbournes, he might perhaps have been over-anxious for them.'

'Does she adhere to this madness about keeping them segregated from other playmates?'

'I am not in her ladyship's confidence as to the children,' said Hil coldly.

'The ladies are having a word with her about it. The idea was preposterous; if she concurs in it, they will have to talk her out of it.'

They'll have their work cut out, he thought, to talk Lady Hilbourne out of anything on which she had made up her mind. But already the cousins were shrugging it off. 'Impossible of accomplishment, anyway. Children will be children and find playmates, and young men and women equally will find mates. They'll always sniff their way to freedom—if marriage can be called freedom.'

'You speak as if they were animals, Henry,' said his brother.

'Well, and so they are animals—and animals will mate, it's the oldest law in the world. Let you tether them never so closely, these pretty little heifers will find out a suitable young taurus to couple with.'

And now the pretty heifers were toiling up to the house on the hill to tell him all about their conquests. At least, he thought, watching them cross the little lawn, like two flowers risen up out of his garden, halo'ed with gold, their father's second marriage had saved them from the crudities of life with such as their Cousin Henry. 'Well, my doves—how high did you fly to the stars last night?'

‘Oh, Hil, it was beautiful—’

‘Everything went so splendidly—’

‘Lyneth danced with Lord Benchly and he *nearly* proposed—’

‘But he’s only a no-Lord really, so of course I refused him.’

‘Fancy on the very first time he met her!’

‘He didn’t really,’ said Lyneth, laughing. ‘I was mostly only teasing.’

(Were you teasing, thought Christine, when you said that Lawrence had wished he might dance with you for ever?) ‘And Sir Edward Groome danced with her and said she was as light on her feet as the pretty white feathers in her hair...’

‘And who made pretty speeches to *you*, my darling?’

‘Oh, she had more successes even than I,’ said Lyneth, ‘only she’s too modest to speak of them. But my cousin Bertha overheard old Lady Lilac, at least we call her Lady Lilac because she’s dressed in lilac all over, even down to her silk stockings, Hil!—well, she said that Christine was a sweeter looking girl than me. She said I looked a proper little puss.’

‘And so she is, and so you do,’ said Hil, laughing. But his heart was sick within him, for was not this all that their father had dreaded for them?—was not this part of the reason why he himself...? He turned his mind from that thought: the sick thought that, buried away in his consciousness, was with him night and day, the marriage that had been acceptable because it could bring no more doomed Hilbournes into the world. Well, let them be happy now, with their sweet faces and shining eyes; God knew what was in store for them all too soon! And upon his thought, Christine said, ‘Only it was very cold. I thought the

house too cold.'

'It was a cold night,' he suggested.

'It was warm,' protested Lyneth. 'Everyone felt it warm. Even going home, the people were saying what a warm, starlit night it was.' Of course, she admitted, shrugging, there were the hands; but the hands seemed to be always there nowadays, one got used to the chilly brush across one's cheek. 'Tetty feels them too. She doesn't say so, but now and again you see her unconsciously move her own hand as if she brushed a cold cobweb aside.'

'She is a Hilbourne now,' said Christine. 'It's just the Hilbournes.'

'You didn't catch a chill, my pet?' said Hil, moving away from the dangerous name. 'You look a little pale, today.'

'She doesn't want to ride with me and Tetty.'

'Might I stay here instead, Hil, with you?'

'Yes, indeed; I must do a little gentle pottering among the store cattle down in the Long Meadow. Come round with me, it will be less tiring than to be with this energetic young lady who goes to bed at dawn and sets off for a gallop in mid-morning...' But tucking her hand into his arm, starting off down the far side of the hill with her, he said at once: 'So what is it, Christine? You are unhappy.'

'Oh, Hil—! I danced with him last night, he held me in his arms, it was as though the sky turned upside down and my feet touched the stars. And he said that he could dance with me for ever. He asked me if I should grow tired of dancing for ever only with him. He said his father had told him I was too young for—well, to make up my mind. So he must have spoken to his father about me, Hil, mustn't he?'

The lovely land was spread out below them, a patchwork of fields, feather-stitched within their neat green

hedges, dotted with farms and cottages and little clumps of trees. The countryman in him could not help reflecting that the two estates marching together, divided only by the little river, would add up to a delectable piece of property; nor was there any thought in his mind of the huge increase in value that would accrue. On the other hand... He forced himself to speak warmly to her through his chill fears. 'It would be a happy—alliance—for you, Christine. So close to home.' A new hope arose in him. 'You need never leave the Manor.' Would the old house relent if she made no move to leave it? He knew that past history would prove to him that such a hope was in vain, but it remained something to cling to. 'You've loved him always, haven't you? Since you were a little girl, playing in the woods across the Dar...'

'Oh, Hil—suppose I should lose him! Lyneth says—'

'What does Lyneth say?' he asked sharply.

'She says that he said the same to *her*, last night—that he could dance with her for ever.'

Now indeed his heart began to shake. Was trouble building up already for this, the more vulnerable of his two pretty darlings? 'Young men say such things lightly. It's just a regulation compliment, I daresay. What is more important is what he said about his father. And you know what a tease Lyneth is.'

'She wouldn't tease me about such a thing as this. She knows how much I love him; I could never love anyone else. And you know she has always loved Arthur—well, sort of loved him. He adores *her*.'

Her cousin. Not that, not that! 'I don't think that's very serious, Christine. A boy and girl infatuation.'

'Are Lawrence and me a boy and girl infatuation? I don't think *I* am.'

'Ah, no, my ever-serious Christine! When you love,

where you love—that's all too likely to be for ever. But Lyneth—she'll dance her way through the next year or two till she makes up her mind between a dozen adorers. I don't think she's ready yet to dance with any one person "for ever".'

She walked close to him down the leafy lane, clinging to his arm, her silky head touching his shoulder. 'But if he should be one of the adorers! I think that Lawrence is a for-ever person too. He said that when we were little girls we were so much alike that he never quite knew which he loved the best, *I* knew,' she said wistfully. 'I knew when I was six years old, I can remember always loving Lawrence. But Lyn—supposing when she *is* ready to dance with one person "for ever", it's Lawrence.'

'Lyn has her own way too much,' said Hil. 'They all spoil her and you spoil her too, Christine, always giving way to her—'

She interrupted, she said quickly: 'I wouldn't give way about Lawrence. I wouldn't let her take Lawrence away from me, even if she begged me to let him go; not if he loved me. Other things don't matter, she wants things so *much* when she wants them. I don't want things like Lyn does, I don't really care about a wreath of roses or a wreath of feather-flowers; or this dress or the other one—why shouldn't she have what she wants so much more than I want it? But with Lawrence—that's different. I wouldn't give way about that, that's something I do care about. Only... Suppose she *really* wanted him. And suppose he wanted her!'

She had said that she would fight and she fought. But what weapons were available between two devoted sisters, intent upon gaining the love of the same young man? 'Oh,

Christine, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, dearest, I know that you love him, but what can I do? If he loves *me*...

'You want him because I want him, Lyn. You've always wanted anything I had and now with Lawrence, it's the same all over again. But this time, I can't, I won't let him go.'

'But, darling, we can't order him to love you!'

'He does love me, he's always loved me. At our coming-out ball—'

Hil spoke seriously to Lyn; unwisely, for the message went straight back to Tetty. 'You don't think, Tetty, that I've fallen in love with Lawrence because Christine wants him?'

'Are you two girls mad? There's a dozen already at your feet; Lawrence Jones is not the only young man in the world. You, you foolish child, think what you could yet become—a great lady, a very marchioness, and these things aren't to be despised, Lyneth. Why should you tie yourself down to a boy you've known all your life, and to Plas Dar just across the river, no change, no excitement?—when you might go out into the great world. Let Christine have Lawrence. No, since you ask me, I'm *not* sure that you don't want Lawrence only because you don't want Christine to win him over you—?'

'That's what Hil says.'

And at that name, once again the old iron perversity clamped down upon them all. '—though of course, my child, you can't help it if it's you that Lawrence prefers. He is not just a bone for two sisters to be quarrelling over, and if you truly love him, Lyneth—'

'Tetty, you can't believe how much I adore him! Only it's so terrible if Christine loves him too.'

'Well, neither of you can go and propose to Lawrence! It's simply a matter of his declaring to one or other of you.'

Or to neither of you!’

‘Oh, Tetty, I shall die if he doesn’t!’

But Christine also must ‘die if he didn’t’—did, in fact, every day die a little in her heart as his easy, young-man’s love allowed itself to be gradually divided between two identically pretty and charming girls, ever more away from the gentle, unassuming one with her almost overt acknowledgement of her love, to the laughing, teasing, only too possibly unattainable, deliciously unpredictable twin. And on their eighteenth birthday...

Not a great ball this time, as at their coming-out: just a small party for friends from the closer neighbourhood, but with the ballroom opened for dancing and the air of excitement pervading all the day, that Tante Louise well knew how to whip up: Madame dearly loved to exercise her talents in contributing to an ‘occasion’. And no question now as to which sister should wear this dress or that, this head-dress or that, this or that pair of slippers. Lyneth having made her one great claim, no longer argued over the petty ones: nor need she, since Christine, listless, uncaring, expressed no choice, accepted what was with genuine love and caring pressed upon her. ‘*You* have the pink dress, darling, it will give you some colour, light up your face; you’re so pale, darling, you’re sure you’re not unwell?’ Nevertheless, Lyn went no more to visit Hil these days, who would have given a stern answer to her anxieties about her sister, which she did not dare to provoke.

Dressing for the party seated before her mirror, Lyneth in all her radiant loveliness, soft fair hair curling deliciously, blue eyes bright with the innocent delight of a young girl at the height of her triumphs. Christine came through to her there. ‘Oh, darling, you’re dressed already?

You look lovely, I knew the pink dress would suit you...'

They had separate rooms now, in the main part of the house, decorated with all the ex-Parisienne's taste and charm. Christine sat down on a small gilded chair beside the dressing-table with its curlicued mirror, its pretty china boxes and pots, the pearl-backed brushes and combs.

'Lyneth—will Lawrence propose to you tonight?'

'Propose? Darling, how do I know? Perhaps he'll propose to *you*!'

'If he proposed to you—will you accept him?'

She turned away from the mirror, faced her sister directly, her hands clasped in the lap of the billowing white dress. She said simply: 'I know you love him, Christine—but so do I.'

'Do you love him truly, Lyn? Do you love him like I do? I've loved him all my life, I don't know any other love, I could never know any other...' She put her hand to her heart in a movement almost of fierceness. 'My loving him is—a sort of part of me, if I lose him I think all this—all this part of me will almost literally die. There's no other life for me, nothing else to care for or care about—I might as well be dead.'

'Oh, Christine—oh, darling!'

'So I have to know, Lyn. If he loves you, if you love him—well, I must die; my heart must die. I only ask you, now Lyneth at this last hour—'

'I do love him, darling, how can I help myself?'

'But do you really, Lyn? Is it real? Is it my sort of love, the killing love, the hopeless, helpless for ever and ever love? If it is... I only ask you to *know* that, to be absolutely sure of it, both of you, not to go into this lightly, just for the—the happiness and excitement of it. Please be terribly sure... Please, Lyneth, please!'

‘Oh, Christine—if you could know!’

She put her hand to her heart again. ‘Do you ask me if I know?’ And a terrible shudder went through her. A sunny evening, after a long warm day, but—‘Lyneth,’ she said, ‘the cold is here. It’s dangerous, it’s warning us. The hands are here, it seems as though they are closing around my heart...’

‘Oh, Christine—darling—don’t frighten me! I—yes, the cold is here and the hands, like icicles. But...Well, we’ve always felt them, Christine, the cold hands reaching out towards us, and it never seems to have meant anything—I mean no warning, nothing has happened.’

‘I think they have been warning us always, always,’ said Christine. ‘About tonight.’

Lawrence stood before Lady Hilbourne, humbly. ‘My lady—I thought that I should speak to you first. You know that I want to ask Lyneth to marry me.’

She sat erect and grim in her customary chair, the straight-backed chair with its delicate scrollwork, upholstered in a brocade, striped with pale flowers. The last chance: here positively here and now was the last chance to do what was right, to put her arms around her two beloved children and fight for them against the chill forces that threatened their future. But was it not those same forces that held her back? Echoes of a dream forgotten, thrummed in her mind. She said uncertainly: ‘Well, but Lawrence...’

‘As their guardian. Her family have known our family for generations. I’m the only child, I have—enough—to offer her, Lady Hilbourne; and my parents—’

‘Your parents it appears have not thought fit to consult the young lady’s former governess in the matter.’

‘Oh, Lady Hilbourne, it isn’t that. I’m sure that my

parents—well, I think they haven't spoken yet because they thought that Christine—' He said rather miserably: 'For such a long time it was Christine and me—Lyneth with her cousin Arthur, and Christine with me. I think they're afraid that Christine may still—'

The last chance: the final moment. But she felt the cold, like an icicle thrust into her heart, she heard in her ears the young voices, 'Hil says... Hil thinks...' and she found her own voice saying: 'They think that because Christine may have failed to grow out of these childish loves, you and Lyneth are to sacrifice your own happiness? They are not the only ones to have expressed such an opinion.' A moment of terrifying silence and she said: 'I do not agree with them.'

'Well, but... It seems presumptuous to say so, but if Christine—well, if she still cares for me... I can't bear to hurt her. My mother says—she said, "You will break the child's heart." '

'A girl's heart does not break as easily as that,' she said, whose own young heart had broken so many years ago and turned to a block of ice. 'And there is still Lyneth? If she loves you—and you seem very rich in feminine adorers, dear boy!—why must it be she who breaks her heart?' Her fingers were clawed so that the blunt, polished nails made little arcs in the palms of her hands, but she said, lightly shrugging: 'Christine has as many admirers as Lyneth. She will soon find someone else.'

'If *you* believe that—who know them so well...' He said joyfully: 'Then you think I may propose to Lyneth tonight?'

'You have my blessing at least,' said her ladyship; and knew that any blessing of hers must be a dark and misshapen benefit indeed.

Christine came to her as she still sat there, brooding; and at

once her mood changed. 'Oh, my child, how ill, how pale you look!' Wrong, it had been wrong, wicked and wrong, to break this gentle creature on the wheel of her own despairs. But... Something urged me on, she thought: how can I fight against the unseen? And after all, could she help it if the foolish boy could not keep himself true to his own true original love? Did *I* encourage him to change? Is it for me to say who shall love whom, how am *I* to control their hearts? And for a moment her own bitter heart went back to the days of her own true love: where now was the tenderness of those long ago days? All gone, she thought: all gone in an hour... And she heard in her mind the snap! with which the pencil had broken across in his two hands and she had known her fate and turned her heart to stone. And yet... Had that hour not also been somehow preordained? Dimly, dimly, once again her mind remembered, the dream returned, a phrase only half-forgotten...

'Never again...'

Christine in the cloud of pale silk, crouching at her feet, gripping her hands, 'Oh, Tetty—I'm frightened. I... Some guests have come but I...'

She rose, startled, to her feet. 'Guests arrived already?'

'In the hall. Some people... But I didn't know... Tetty, I don't know who they are. A woman, very beautiful and a tall young man. They... He... He looked at me so strangely, Tetty, he stared and stared at me, his eyes... They said nothing, she took him by the arm and moved away with him, almost pulled him away as though she were angry with him. But he turned his head and looked back at me, and, oh Tetty!—his eyes...'

She lifted the trembling girl to her feet. 'Come, Christine, what nonsense is this? You are hysterical. Some people? What people? You know everyone invited here

tonight.'

'Yes, and I—I think after all I do know these people, I've seen them before. But long ago...' She covered her face with her hands. 'Long ago. Long ago, when I was a child. He—I remember that he looked frightened: that time that I saw him, I thought that he looked frightened. And, Tetty, I don't know what to do, I don't understand it—he looked frightened again tonight.'

And not the only heart that was filled with fear. 'Dear God! Well—! You are ill, Christine, we must say that you are ill, go to your room and lie down; only, dearest, they will say that it's because of—Lyneth...'

'It's not because of Lyneth,' said Christine. 'That's just heartbreak. This is fear.'

Among the guests, no recognisable sign of a couple who might be less than familiarly recognised. Her ladyship moved like clockwork on her round of civilities. 'Yes, our poor Christine... A little chill, no more... May feel well enough later to appear amongst us...' If I could speak a word to those two children in secret, she thought, and beg them, 'Not tonight! Not tonight!' But Lawrence, exultant in her acquiescence, hardly made a secret of his present situation, Lyneth all laughter and blushes could not now be restrained. Bowing and smiling, moving here and there among her guests, stiff and expressionless as ever, she nevertheless watched in an agony of apprehension as the boy took his sweetheart's hand and led her out into blue evening; and her cold heart wept. Too late!

In the little courtyard outside the vacated dining-room, where a fountain played, Lawrence held Lyneth in his arms. 'Oh, my darling, I'm so thankful, I'm so happy. You, who have so many people adoring you, I was terrified that I might lose you.'

She said loyally: 'Lawrence—are you absolutely sure? You know that Christine loves you too. She loves you—almost terribly, Lawrence.'

He said uncomfortably, 'It's just left over from our being children. We loved each other then, we all loved each other, Arthur loved *you*, and I loved Christine. Only she's so—faithful. But she'll find somebody else now. You and Arthur don't love each other any more; well, of course not, as your Tetty says, we were all just babies. And Christine—she has scores of admirers, she'll have lots of proposals, she'll find someone else to love.'

'I'm not so sure, Lawrence.'

'It's only because... It's difficult to say it, dearest, but if I'm—well, out of the way, then she can give herself up to being easy and free with other people, she's so quiet these days and well, listless, people think she's...' But it was all intruding upon his own ecstatic happiness. 'I have you, my sweet, lovely, wonderful darling and I can't let anything interfere with that.'

'Oh, yes, Lawrence, and I love you too!'

'I couldn't believe that you'd ever say that, I couldn't believe you'd say yes. Sometimes I was sure you would... I even got a ring to offer to you... But then...'

'Oh, Lawrence, a ring, a ring! What's it like? Show me, show me!'

'Well, that's what I'm saying. I didn't dare to bring it out here when I—when I was going to propose to you. I thought it seemed sort of presumptuous. I think I thought it would be bad luck.'

'You left it at home?'

'No, no; it's in the pocket of my coat in the cloakroom.'

'Oh, get it for me, Lawrence, do get it! And then we can go in and show them all that we're really and truly engaged,

we're going to be married, we're seriously engaged...!'

A symbol, perhaps, a sign to Christine?—that this was *fait accompli*, done, finished with, no going back...? She leaned against the low wall that ringed the tiny courtyard and the love in her heart for her twin sister, fought with the old, ingrained determination that what she herself wanted, that must be hers. 'Do go and get it, quick!'

A young man appeared, strolling round the corner, propping himself negligently against the wall, smiling at her as she stood waiting—a slightly teasing smile as though he had perhaps overheard the proposal and acceptance, all the billing and cooing of two happy young people in love. She said, astonished for she seemed to have observed him at the party earlier, 'Well—good evening! I'm afraid I don't recognise you—please forgive me. Are you one of our guests?'

'You might perhaps describe me as a guest,' he said.

'Might describe you—? What else? You're not here as a burglar, for example?'

'A little of that too, I daresay,' he admitted.

She looked at him more closely, a tall, strongly-built young man, with very brilliant blue eyes and red-gold hair—in his general make-up, not unlike Hil. 'Are you—? You seem to have a resemblance to some of our family. Are you a relative? A remote cousin, perhaps?'

'Fairly remote,' he agreed. 'But a cousin, yes.' He glanced up away from her. 'But here is—your fiancé—coming. I had better say—'

She cared only to be with Lawrence, receive her ring. She said hastily, 'Goodnight, then. Goodbye.'

'—*au revoir*,' he said, and slipped quietly away.

Lawrence came, hurrying towards her, the little box in his hand. 'Who was that I heard you talking to?'

She shrugged. 'Some young man.'

'I didn't see any young man.'

'Love is blind! He was standing right here talking to me.'

'Yes, well.' He said, suddenly unwontedly ill-humoured: 'I rather wish we needn't have had your admirers intruding actually between my offering you my ring and giving it to you.'

'He wasn't an admirer—some vague cousin or someone. Anyway, how could I help it?—he just appeared out of the blue. But what does it all matter—let me see my ring!' As he fumbled with the box, she said laughing: 'I do believe you're actually trembling.'

'I hadn't realised how cold it is out here,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'It is, suddenly. Quick, give me the ring and we'll go into the warm.'

He had the box open and it lay there, shining—the betrothal ring. 'Lawrence—a sapphire? It's beautiful, it's beautiful!' But the cold was piercing, their hands shook with it, the ring passing between them fell from his shaking fingers and lay there in the little fountain, winking up at them. 'Oh, Lawrence!' she said impatiently. 'Look what you've done now! You're really too clumsy for anything...'

His bright face clouded over. Without a word, he stooped and fished the ring out of the shallow water and handed it to her. A little scared, she stammered out: 'But Lawrence—?'

'Put it on for yourself, Lyn,' he said. 'On your marriage-finger. Then I shall know that you really want to wear it there.'

Her blue eyes filled with tears. 'Of course I want it—of course I do!' She held out her hand to him. 'Please! I'm asking you.'

But, ice-cola from the ice-cola water, it seemed as though it closed about her finger in a little band of pain.

And the evening ended, the congratulations, the smiles and the kisses, and the carriages clip-clopped away; for a little while, the long, hilly driveway was studded with the twinkling points of the lantern lights. When they were gone, the night fell very dark. There were no stars.

And the ghosts moved in.

CHAPTER 13

THE RUSTLE OF SILK, the swish of velvet against velvet, the faint, faint whispering of starched ruffs chafing... In their baskets in the darkened hall, the little dogs shivered and whined and a chill wind blew though there had been no opening of the great front door. She leaned in all her beauty, against the newel post at the foot of the stairs: Lenora. ‘So Diccon—another aeon of waiting is at an end and we are here again!’

‘We’ve watched and listened. We’ve not been far away all these years since the last one died, poor pretty Anne.’

‘We keep close in our hands the threads of contact with the old house: who else is to slam the doors and set alight the small conflagrations that keep our victims within reach? But at last came that other one and then immediately the governess—Lady Hilbourne, forsooth! And still the curse prevailed. You could hardly call those two happy brides!’

‘Hardly brides at all; the one moving out of the house, the other with a marriage lasting but an hour.’

‘So we had to be content with non-appearances; just—influences. And with this one, here in the Manor, we have had some entertainment.’

He came to the staircase, stood a couple of steps below her, looking up into her face. ‘*You* find it all an entertainment. But... That poor pretty Welshwoman—what harm had she ever done to anyone?’

‘She had strayed like a foolish sheep into the dangerous fold of the Anathema. That was enough.’

‘You and your Anathema! What good has it ever done to you and me?’

The blue velvet gown was hooped around her beautiful figure—not so tall as he, of course, but finely built, not an angle in any movement of the smooth, rounded limbs: the gem-sprinkled under-dress, jewelled slippers sparkling in the light of the dying fire as they had sparkled and glittered in the old sombre library, two hundred and fifty years ago. ‘It has given us—a purpose. A moment in the endless chain of moments that make up our eternity of greyness. They say among the living that a man can’t endure, even through his brief spell of lifetime, without hope. You know this yourself—intolerant as ever, *you* wouldn’t live an hour without it.’

‘And so condemned myself to an eternity without it. And you, also. Why need you have followed my lead?’

‘What, let you go off without your keeper to the courts of heaven! You’d made trouble enough in the courts below.’ She laughed. ‘Had you no fear of that old woman? A thousand times I thought you must be at last for the execution block. There was once you actually brushed by her in your impetuosity, rushing off upon your own occasions, never stopping to think for a moment.’

‘How could men fear her? She was like a wooden doll, a white-painted wooden doll, poking out head and hands from a great stiff bell of costume. I gave her due loyalty.’

‘And a sort of affection?’

He said, shrugging, ‘Because I was not afraid of her. I should like to see her again; she grew grotesque but she was still—tremendous. She must be somewhere in the Other World but we never come across her. Why are we so isolated there, Lenora? What did we do wrong?’

‘All this I explain to you, Diccon, each time we come away back to this world. What we did wrong was the ultimate wrong. We were two sparks, two of myriads upon myriads of sparks, all ignited for no purpose but to fly up to

the ultimate Light and augment its shining: to be part of the Light. We extinguished those sparks, each by his own hand, you for a faithless girl, I for love and care for you, my little impetuous feckless brother. We robbed the Light of our little specks of brightness and had nothing to offer but two smudges of lifeless black.' She smiled down at him, putting her hand to his cheek where the great pearl hung in its gentle glow. 'Why so serious tonight? Usually you're all eagerness for the return, for the conquest of yet another Hilbourne heart. And this one the charmingest yet.'

He looked back at her uneasily. 'The conquest. I enjoy. Not always the aftermath. And this time I seem to feel somehow a sort of dread.'

'A dread? What has it ever been to us, but an amusing game?'

'A viciously amusing game,' he said. 'That's why it's played.'

'You've played it many times readily enough. One girl after another—'

'This time there are two girls,' he said. 'Alike as two pins. And I saw the—other—girl first, I thought she was the one intended, I supposed she was the bride.'

'And in this one brief glimpse, lost your heart? You have forgotten, little brother, who and what you are. You have no heart to lose, you are a ghost, you are dead.'

'I died for love,' he said.

She regarded him thoughtfully. 'Well—that's true. It accounts perhaps for many things. For myself, there is no such thing as love, no thought of anything but the vengeance I swore so long ago. But with you, there is often something a little akin to human love—a fondness, at any rate. You felt it for the mother of these two girls, that pretty Anne. And for one or two before her—was there a

Margaret? A dainty little blonde called Elizabeth?—they have all been blonde, the ones you’ve cared for; as your original Isabella was blonde.’

He said slowly, almost painfully: ‘Lenora—have you not seen it? These two girls—Isabella was their ancestress: and they are as alike to her as they are to one another.’

‘Then beware of giving away this half-human heart of yours to either,’ she said. ‘Remember how she used you! And now another girl awaits you who seems not all that much better: having, herself, not very much heart to lose. But such as she has, is already a little turned your way since you interrupted her betrothals by the fountain pool. So forget the little sister who is not a bride, and come up to meet the one that is. For we haunt again!’

And she took his hand and led him up the broad staircase to where, helpless, their victim awaited them.

The experience of countless generations of her family had conditioned her, one must suppose, to acceptance of the ghosts. As the dogs in the hall, sensing their chill presence, had stirred and whined, so now her own pet in its little basket at the foot of her bed, started up a shrill yapping, and Lyneth opened her eyes and saw without astonishment the beautiful lady who had stood long ago, as her mother’s coffin was carried out of the house—and the handsome young man she had seen for the second time, earlier that same evening.

Unprepared for an array of Tudor costume, her modern-day eyes transmuted into the dress of her own times the ruffs and hooped petticoats, the doublet and hose, the short cape of soft Moroccan leather with its fashionably dangling empty sleeve. That they should be here in the dawn hours in her own little room with its pretty, curtained, four-poster

bed, seemed oddly to surprise her not at all. She caught up a shawl and, clasping it decorously about her, skipped out of bed and fell at once to performance of the hospitable duties of a well-bred young lady. 'How charming to see you! Do please be seated—unless you'd prefer to come down to the salon? But it might be cold there, the house has seemed chilly this evening.'

'It will never seem cold while we're with you, my pretty one.'

'No, I understand that,' said Lyneth. 'Now that you're here, I understand it. Before it did often seem—mysterious. A lot of things seemed vaguely strange but now, of course, the mists clear away...' Having seen them seated upon the little silk-upholstered bedroom chairs, she hopped back on to the high four-poster and sat comfortably curled up against her pillows. 'It all seems so delightfully familiar.' To Richard she said: 'But you and I met a little while ago, didn't we?'

'Does it seem a little while to you?' said Richard, putting on a languishing air. 'To me it has seemed eternity till I saw you again.'

The sweet face grew a little pink with embarrassment. 'You were very naughty. You interrupted my young man in the declaration of his intentions.'

'Too late, alas, to prevent it altogether.'

'But we are promised. I love him.'

'Nonsense, sweetheart!' said Lenora. 'One may love a dozen young men at your age, one by one or even two or three at a time. Richard was head over ears about a girl—Isabella, her name was—just a few years ago—'

'Two hundred and fifty,' said Richard, behind his hand to his sister, grinning, 'to be more precise.'

'—but he has long ago entirely recovered from it.'

‘Oh, I hardly claim that, Lenora,’ said Richard, lounging long-legged in his chair, watching the small cloud of chagrin pass over the lovely little face at this hint of a rival. He assumed a look of gentle sorrow. ‘All I claim is to be doing my best not to sigh too long for what may never be.’

‘And is she lost to you indeed?’ said Lyneth, a touch too eagerly. He certainly was a very beautiful young man, as beautiful as Hil had been in those long ago days of her childhood, who nowadays was grown so grave and sombre, with all the light gone from the red-gold blond of his hair.

Lenora sat on the stool before the dressing-table, the mirror reflecting back her face with its flashing dark eyes and the smooth, dark coils of her coiffure. ‘Lost indeed. But I still have hopes of his ultimate resignation.’ She looked at them both, teasingly. ‘Isabella, in fact, much resembled you; and Diccon has always adored a blue-eyed blonde.’

‘Alas, however, that this particular blue-eyed blonde is already promised!’

‘As long as you preface that with “alas”!’ said Richard, ‘may there not be hope for me?’

She said, vaguely bewildered, ‘But—are you not a ghost? Can you ask me to give up my flesh and blood lover for a ghost?’

‘He is not precisely proposing for your hand in marriage,’ said Lenora, lifting an ironical eyebrow.

‘He won’t ask that I love another man outside my marriage?’

Richard looked at her, languishing again. ‘Why need you marry at all?’

‘Nonsense, Richard,’ said Lenora sharply, ‘she must marry. It is a necessary part of the Anathema.’

‘An anathema? There is actually a curse on our family?’

‘Come, Lyneth, nonsense, you must have known

something of it? You've felt our hands touching you, you've known that we prevented you and your sister from leaving the Manor...'

'You put this curse on us, Lenora?'

'My dear child, it was my Anathema. That this house should never—' Richard gave her a warning look. '—that we should always come to visit any daughter of this house about to be married... And so we come back and visit; and as it just happens, now and again, these girls fall to the charms of Diccon—'

'How could they help it?' said Richard, laughing.

'—and your mother was one of them.'

'But—my mother was a married woman.'

'The affair of course was in no way improper, my dear.'

'How could it be? I don't physically exist,' suggested Richard, shrugging.

'In that case, you haven't got a heart to feel.'

'Feeling—being in love, for instance—is an emotional matter: not physical.'

'And are you now suggesting that you are in love with me?' said Lyneth, with an air of pretty provocation.

'My hand on my non-existent heart!'

'Do you call it non-existent?' said Lenora, 'when time after time you lose it to the Hilbourne young ladies?'

Lyneth's mind wandered back vaguely to the long family history of brief lives, or lives tinged with inexplicable malaises. 'But often those girls have been not real Hilbournes. They've been outsiders, marrying into the family, marrying the sons.'

'Richard doesn't make these fine distinctions. As long as the young ladies come to him here. He can't haunt outside the house.'

'You haunt only Hilbourne young ladies—?'

‘It does show a certain particularity,’ said Richard, ‘whatever Lenora may say about fine distinctions.’

‘Or vanity? You can’t bear to see another man get the better of you? You must entice away the pretty girls?’

‘Well, that’s it, isn’t it? They will persist in choosing such delectable charmers. And now I see before me the most delectable of all.’

‘Who however is not for you,’ she persisted. ‘I am promised.’

‘Yes, and must marry,’ said Lenora with a warning glance at him. ‘There must be future generations or we can’t come back here again. Even in the Other World, we should lose our identities.’

He shrugged. ‘She has a sister. Let her sister see to the future generations. Not that—’ He broke off and looked rather uneasily at Lenora.

‘I think that even to oblige *him*,’ said Lyneth, teasing, ‘my sister is unlikely to do that. Her heart really is engaged, once and for ever, to another man.’

‘You say that as though your own were less totally committed?’

‘Now it is you who are making fine distinctions,’ said Lyneth sharply. But her own heart gave a little shake.

‘At that rate, she is certainly not for Diccon,’ said Lenora. ‘His sights are set—though for the moment he seems, most strangely, to have forgotten it—upon young ladies who will marry in good time and produce heirs for this branch of the family.’

‘Then his plight is most pitiable,’ said Lyneth, assuming the arch look that had enchanted so many of her adorers. ‘For my sister is not likely to marry—and therefore it seems is not for him: and I *am* about to marry and therefore most certainly am not for him.’

‘In this case, we need trouble you no further,’ said Richard, a little too crisply for her comfort’s sake; and as abruptly as they had come—they were not there. She was a little frightened to discover how much she was upset by the fear that they might not return.

But they returned. Pert young ladies were to be taught a lesson and they were long, long practised in the art of their terrible courtship.

No easy rest for Lady Hilbourne either, tossing uneasily in the huge four-poster in her beautiful bedroom in the main body of the house. To her door came Christine, timidly knocking. ‘Oh, Tetty—I haven’t wakened you? I heard you moving.’

‘No, I’m sleepless tonight. And you too, my poor darling?’ Christine came close to the bedside, took the outheld hand in two of her own. ‘It’s more than that, Tetty. I feel so frightened. Lyneth—through the wall between our rooms, I could hear her talking—well, talking in her sleep, I suppose, but it sounded so—so...’

The guilty heart lurched in her breast. ‘Lyneth talking —?’

‘She’s excited, Tetty, I suppose, and restless and talking in her sleep? Only...’

‘Only what, Christine?’

‘Only that it was more like a—conversation! Like people talking, not just Lyn muttering to herself, as people do when they’re asleep.’ She crouched by the bedside, her face as white as the white embroidered nightgown with its ruffles of lace. ‘Tetty—our mother... They say she used to—to talk to—well, to herself.’

‘I’ll come, darling,’ said Tetty. She got out of bed, found a wrap and, filled with a fathomless sense of guilty fear,

took her step-daughter by the arm and hurried with her along the cold corridors towards Lyneth's room. Outside her door, they paused. No sound from within. She put her trembling fingers to the door-handle and slowly and softly turned it. 'She's asleep,' she said. 'It's all right. She's fast asleep.'

Fast asleep, curled up against the heaped pillows, the golden hair tumbled about the sweet, innocent face; and on her lips a little smile.

'But what a strange, musky scent there is in here,' Lady Hilbourne said.

Somewhere, she had smelt that perfume before.

CHAPTER 14

LAWRENCE JONES, APPEARING NEXT morning with a bouquet of flowers, to enquire after the health, strength and happiness of his lady after so eventful an evening, was received with a honeyed coolness a little shattering to his confident ardour. And indeed, compared with all the grace and elegance of last night's apparition, he did appear suddenly as really rather an ordinary young man, after all; honest and eager, a little too easy of achievement—no rival blue-eyed blonde lurked in the recesses of Lawrence's memories: a boyhood devotion to her sister Christine, of course, but that had proved ephemeral. Slept well?—indeed yes, she had slept very well thank you; and she smiled to herself as she added that she had been disturbed only by delightful dreams. He took this with natural simplicity as referring to their mutual happiness.

And the ring? It was a little disappointing to discover that instead of wearing it every moment of her waking life, she had left it on her dressing-table upstairs. How explain that as she lifted it from its place of security in her dressing-table drawer, a cool hand seemed to take it out of hers and replaced it. She started to stammer out that it was too precious to be worn about the house and grounds all day, but something, some hint of mockery in the air, impelled her to say instead: 'I can hardly be seen parading that great flashing stone around, at this time of the morning.'

He had spent hours of agonising doubt in its choice. Now he suggested rather unhappily: 'Perhaps I should have found something a little less... Well, more suitable for everyday wear. But my mother approved it.'

Now the mockery was audible and a murmur of laughter; and to her terror, suddenly they were there!—standing on the stairs looking down to where they two stood before the great fireplace in the hall. And she found herself saying, ‘Tante Louise says that diamonds should never be worn before sunset; and whatever else, in such matters Tante Louise is faultless.’

‘My mother would agree with her,’ he said, a trifle put out by this reflection upon her good taste. ‘But she takes it to refer to heavy bracelets and necklaces, I think, and so on. Perhaps also to a large obtrusive diamond ring. That would be why she advised the sapphire.’

From the stair, they looked encouragement with smiles of mischievous glee. She saw them as in modern-day dress, charmingly fashionable, so handsome, so beautiful—and the red-gold crop of hair outshining all. But she forced her eyes away, said, shrugging: ‘Oh, well, of course—if Lady Jones draws a distinction between a large obtrusive diamond and a large obtrusive sapphire—’ and heard the chafing sigh of ghostly clapping hands.

Simple he might be and so much less—exciting, than she had thought him, with his clear brown eyes and the dull brown hair, curling, that only yesterday had seemed so full of golden lights; but he was not without spirit. He suggested with a stiff little bow: ‘Perhaps you would prefer to return the ring to me—’ he paused long enough to catch the startled flash of blue—‘and have it replaced by something more acceptable to you—and of course to your Aunt Louise.’

Laughter on the stairs, downright derisive now: but she ignored it in her sudden apprehension. ‘Oh, Lawrence, no! I didn’t mean... I only meant...’

A relief then, when Christine came down, brushing by

them unseeing—they parted, standing aside with impish courtesy to make way for her—and with a smile on her pale face, touched Lawrence’s hand and kissed her sister, to wish them both joy. Yes, she had slept well, thank you; but in the early hours had heard this wicked girl talking in her sleep, enough to waken the dead...

Well, indeed, you might say that, said Lyneth with a conspiratorial glance upward; just exactly what she *had* been doing! Now the laughter was mocking no longer but fond and indulgent. Over their heads, Richard made her a little bow and kissed his hand to her. She looked anxiously to see whether Christine or Lawrence observed anything; but he seemed only to shiver a little and she wrapped her shawl more closely around her, both looking out, vaguely puzzled, at the hot August sunshine. On the stairs, Lenora signalled secretly to Richard: She’s yours!

How swiftly they had struck!—beguiling her within the first few moments of their manifestation in her bedroom, to this tiny conspiracy of a—flirtation—with Richard; so that she could not immediately fly to her sister with confidences, the ghosts have appeared to me, not just brushes of their chill hands but in—well, what looks like the flesh. What does this mean, what shall I do? How can I counter them, come away from their influence? Instead they had chained her with sweet looks and words, into a sense of conspiracy which kept her silent. But it was, after all, only a flirtation and not of her making, either, and she frowned at them with a laugh beneath the frown and shook her head. The frown said, ‘You’re naughty, don’t tease me, leave me alone!’ and upon the frown the pair vanished, were there no more.

Christine said, ‘What are you looking at, Lyn?—what’s the matter?’ and with her words, there was a small yelp and

one of the dogs was scrambling down the stairs just where they had stood.

Lyneth cried out, 'Oh, he's limping, he's hurt himself!' and flew up to get him. 'Oh, Lawrence—his little foot!'

Lawrence took the dog from her, handling him with the ease of the country-bred young man, accustomed to dealing with animals. 'It's nothing: he has a pin caught between two paws.' The present generation of dogs were christened after characters from favourite novels. This one was Mr Rochester, commonly addressed as Sir in the manner of Miss Eyre. 'Oh, my darling, oh Sir—a pin! Where can he have picked it up?' and Christine, no less terrified, 'Lawrence, it isn't sticking into him?'

'It's my Mr Rochester, Lawrence!'

'Well, hold still, Sir, will you?' said Lawrence. 'One little tweak and we'll soon have it out.' His strong brown fingers delicately parted the pads and with a squeal and wriggle, Mr Rochester found himself set down on the ground, only to be snatched up again to comforting hugs and pettings. 'I think it is I who should be getting the kisses,' said Lawrence, laughing.

'Oh, kind, sweet, clever Lawrence, yes, and here is one for you!' And she put her warm arms around his neck and with her cheek against his murmured that she was sorry she'd been so horrid, she loved her ring, she was just cross and scratchy after the late evening, it had been her fault, her fault...

But that night it was all fun again: the three of them sitting at ease about the pretty bedroom, tenderly teasing. 'Diccon has been moping all day, darling, watching you walk about with—him—'

She protested, 'But I am engaged to marry him.'

'—and riding, wicked girl! Now that isn't fair—he can't

conjure a horse out of the Other World and go galloping after you. Outside the Manor, we lose our existence—our existence in this world, that is. We are prisoners within the doors of this old house.’

‘I saw you once outside it.’

‘Ah, well, just at the door. That was at your poor Mama’s funeral—who died for love of Richard, so only fair that we should have our rein relaxed to that extent. Our rules are precise, but they do give way just an inch or two, for very special occasions.’

‘For the interruption of a young lady’s betrothals, for example,’ said Richard. ‘Fortunately the fountain courtyard is almost part of the house. But you saw that, even for my poor Anne’s funeral, we could go no further than the driveway.’

‘*Your* Anne? Do you say that my mother was in love with you?’

‘We’ve told you,’ said Lenora. ‘What else did she die of, poor sweet thing? Mind you, she was always a rather weak creature—’

‘She was always ill...’

‘She kept to her room,’ said Richard. ‘That needn’t mean she was ill.’ And he added with a laugh and a half-wink that she had not been alone there.

Lyneth sat curled up on the little four-poster bed, its white curtains looped back with pink satin bows. ‘I don’t understand. My mother—was in love with Richard?’

‘Of course,’ said Lenora. ‘All the Hilbourne girls, the Aberdar Hilbournes—fall in love with Richard. We have explained it to you—it is the Anathema.’

‘And even my poor mother?’

‘She pined for me, poor sweet Anne; and so she died. But you are made of sterner stuff, you’ll fight me all the way

—'

'Even to the extent of marrying your dull young man,' said Lenora.

'I hope she need not do that,' said Richard. 'This is not gentle Anne, or Eleanor; or Margaret before her, or Anastasia, that lovely young creature from Gloucestershire.' He said to Lyneth: 'You are going to be one of my true loves.'

Lenora played with the pretty things on the dressing-table. 'They have to marry and get heirs, Diccon, or what becomes of *us*? We should have no brides to return to, we should cease to exist—as this world knows existence.'

'She has a sister, let *her* do the marrying and begetting.' He spoke rather roughly and did not look at Lenora. 'You are different, Lyneth; with you, it's somehow different. Usually—well, I live up to Lenora and her Anathema: it was pronounced for my sake and the game amuses me, I'm not broken-hearted for my poor young ladies; as she reminds me, I have no heart to break. But this time... Perhaps it's the business of the identical twins: perhaps my feeling, such love as I have to offer, is doubly strong.'

'You had better fall in love with my sister too, no one can tell the difference. Then your heart will be divided between us and as it is non-existent, neither of us need worry about you, you need not break ours.'

'But he is here for no other purpose,' said Lenora.

'Indeed, sweet Lyn, you must break your heart for me,' said Richard.

'Even living, I'm said by some people to have none,' said Lyneth, 'any more than you have. So you will have your work cut out. Furthermore, I am a betrothed young lady; all the nonsense means nothing to me.'

A look that in life Lenora had known too well, came to

his face, that face of a handsome, wilful child. 'In that case, we as may as well fade away and be gone.'

She cried out, protesting: had not meant to offend him, only to tease. 'Do come back! Do come back!'

'We will come back.' She heard Lenora's voice from out of nowhere. 'And when we do, little cousin, you will find perhaps that it is not only you who know how to tease!'

They went riding that afternoon, the three of them—Lawrence must meet Hil, in his new situation as Lyneth's betrothed. That Hil had disapproved of her none too covert pursuit of Christine's erstwhile lover, Lyneth well knew, but he was so much a part of their lives that she could not ignore him. But they returned without having seen him, only to find him standing consulting with the head groom in the stable yard—that great, beautiful walled-in square where long ago he had sat with the new nursery governess and told her, 'I am so terrified for them.'

But now he came forward, amiably smiling as they clattered in over the cobbles, helped the girls to alight, held out a friendly hand to Lawrence. 'I hear that you are to be congratulated. Of course, I wish you all possible happiness. And to you, my darling,' he said to Lyneth; and did not look at Christine.

As in those days she had hung on Miss Tetterman's arm, so Lyn now clung close to him as though to wheedle her way back, not into his affections which she knew to be ever constant, but into his good graces. And she was hard to resist, sweet thing, with her pretty little ways, and head over heels in love; she had wanted the boy for the wrong reasons, he thought, but now that she had him, there was surely no doubt about her devotion? And he... He has changed once, thought Hil to himself, but the early love was

a boy's love and now that he has come to a man's love, it will be for ever. If, in the back of his mind, a thought stirred that said, 'God help him!' he refused to acknowledge it. One of his darlings must suffer but it was too late now to alter that.

He put out his free hand to her, nevertheless, unobtrusively and she took it and came and walked close on the other side of him. 'Your little hand is cold, Christine,' he said, for a moment caught off his guard.

'I think I have a slight chill. It's nothing. I shall—get over it,' she said: but he knew in his heart that it was a confidence between them, and did not refer to the chill.

'I think she has bad nights,' said Lyneth. To live skating over Christine's griefs was impossible: all the household knew of her past love, all the household watched with compassion the drooping figure with the sad, pale face—however much, recollecting herself, she straightened up and spoke and smiled as though nothing afflicted her.

Tetty knew, of course, Tante Louise knew—'But Lyneth, you throw yourself away on the boy, *ma chérie*. I weesh for you a so-great marriage, you can be a fine lady; let Christine have thees boreeing Lawrence, *tu es méchante, ma petite*, you want heem only because you cannot have. And this is a game you know very well—it is the same game you play with heem. Every girl in France know this game, her Mama teach her, do not be too easy for to get.' And the staff knew. Miss Christine had loved him since she was a little girl, but of course Miss Lyneth was so gay and clever, she could not help it if the young gentleman settled for her, at the last. You could not help Christine by pretending, thought Lyneth; and she could be trusted to accept that, and play the same game.

Now Christine said smiling, that she would probably

rest better for a little more quiet in the adjoining bedroom. 'I suppose she is dreaming of you, Lawrence. She chatters like a magpie, in her sleep.'

Hil stood stock still, their clinging hands fell away as he dropped his arms to his sides. 'She—*what?*'

'It's a family habit,' said Christine, lightly. 'Our mother did it too. We used to press up against the door when we weren't allowed to go and see her, do you remember, Lyn? We thought there was somebody with her but Papa said no, no, when she was feverish she talked in her sleep.'

'And I am feverish for love of Lawrence,' said Lyn, peeking round Hil to smile at her betrothed. Does she hear the ghosts too, she thought, or is it only me, replying to them? We must all keep quieter. Despite their abrupt departure the night before, there was no doubt in her mind that they would return; she had not seen them today but she had been mostly out of the house, and he couldn't leave the Manor, Lenora had said, so—her mind toyed naughtily with the idea of teasing him; it was what Tante Louise had suggested—'do not be too easy for to get'. Not that he was going to get her anyway, for all his fine figure and his red-gold Hilbourne hair. Her Lawrence was her true love; after all, she had given him her word.

Hil wrote to her ladyship, one of his rare notes, always formal and cold. 'I do not know if Christine has yet mentioned to you that since Lyneth became engaged to marry, she has taken to "talking in her sleep". Their mother from the time of her marriage, increasingly talked with people whom no one else could see; she was thought by the uninitiated to be mad. One dreads that this may be the beginning of what their father wished to avoid when he tried to prevent the children from meeting possible future

lovers. I have no idea that anything can possibly be done about it, but I take the liberty of bringing it to your ladyship's attention.' He dared make no suggestion—the response would be to take exactly the opposite course, to whose detriment it seemed not to matter at all. And anyway—suggest what? One might speak to Lyneth—but what could one say? If she were already in thrall to that curse which he had long believed hung over the family, she was unlikely to confess to it—to 'betray' those terrible visitors from the world unknown. Her mother, he knew, had never spoken of them; challenged, she would reply with a little start, 'Oh, how ridiculous!—I must have been talking to myself,' till the time came, when she would only murmur, 'to my—friends...' And so she had died.

And so before her, Eleanor had died... And Margaret.... And Anastasia had had to be 'kept away'. And the Christines and the Lyneths, the old family names, dying young or growing to a sad, mad old age... The sad, mad brides of Aberdar.

The following morning, the housemaid emptied from her ladyship's waste-basket the torn shreds of the note: patched them together but couldn't make out Mr Hil's handwriting, and tossed them on to the kitchen fire. And Lady Hilbourne summoned Tante Louise and opened consultations on the wedding arrangements.

That night, in her prettiest *peignoir*, Lyneth curled up against her heaped pillows and—dreamed of Lawrence, of course. Nor, as an hour passed and another, were her dreams interrupted. She thought, It's because I said that his—nonsense—meant nothing to me; that I was not for him. But I told them I was only teasing... And she remembered with a moment of chill that voice saying out of the darkness that she would find that it was not only she who 'meant to

tease'. Perhaps, she thought, after all it will be better if he doesn't come again. They were so beautiful, so charming, it was all so—flattering; but sometimes just a tiny bit frightening, too...

They returned, however; and this time as Lenora had subtly warned it might do, the teasing took on a very sharp edge...

A dinner party had been arranged to introduce the young lady's affianced, and his parents, to her nearest family, her father's cousins, Henry Hilbourne and John, and Catherine and Maria, their wives. Their consent in fact had been necessary, but the match was an unexceptionable one, there could be no disagreement. Lawrence, dashing on ahead, down the steep path on the other side of the river from Plas Dar, arrived first and was duly saluted and made much of. 'My parents are using the carriage, they must come the long way round through the village...'

Sir Thomas Jones was a full Welshman, a short, dark, bright-eyed man, forceful and a little pompous: very happy with a marriage that would unite even more closely the two manors marching together—pity it had not been the heiress but he had always been fond of that charming little minx, the twin sister. His wife was a pretty, pink and white woman, softly fat; conscious of a slight inferiority in birth, particularly pleased to be connected by marriage to her aristocratic neighbours.

'But I hope our dear Lyneth will not inherit the family health,' she said as their carriage rumbled up the winding drive to the Manor House. 'The mother died so young. And she was a strange girl, you remember? When first she came as a bride, we were friendly enough and then she seemed gradually to become stand-offish—I thought at first it was personal to myself, but no, soon all the neighbours were

treated the same, she would accept no invitations, or cancelled those she did agree to—'

'She was fatally ill, my dear. Do you expect her to have capered about to oblige her acquaintance, till she fell down dead?'

'But that is what I say, Sir Thomas. You take me up so quick. At the age of twenty-three—she takes ill and dies.'

'Well, our own pretty chick is as blooming as a rose, there's nothing wrong with *her*...'

Perhaps not: he had to confess, however, that upon this occasion his favourite's manner was not at all what one would have wished. He observed that the grim step-mother bent upon her a puzzled and anxious eye.

For Lyneth, usually so easy and happy, confident in her modest little airs and graces, seemed suddenly overwhelmed with self-consciousness and affectation; with sideways glances about the room as though she exchanged private jokes with hidden friends—jokes, moreover, hardly complimentary to the present company; compensating with little bursts of rather feverish chattering, biting on her lip to conceal a naughty smile, actually bursting into smothered giggles as, with due formality, the guests took their places at the dining-table. What on earth had come to the child? 'Lyneth!' said Lady Hilbourne in a warning undertone.

'Oh, Tetty! I'm sorry, but—'

But They are here! Lenora, leaning with her beautiful curved white arm propped negligently against the oak, softly dark, of the high mantelshelf, Richard moving here and there in comic imitation of strutting Sir Thomas, of Maria and Catherine bowing their coiffured heads to left and right, full of graceful civilities; of Cousin Henry, huffing and puffing, and Lady Jones with her twittering anxiety to please—actually taking a chair, the wretch, the devil!—so

that positively the poor woman sat down in his lap!

‘Oh, my lady—have a care!’ called Lyneth in involuntary warning; and blurted foolish explanations, ‘I was afraid the chair was unsafe—not quite comfortable—’

‘But indeed, dear child,’ piped Richard in her ladyship’s deprecating voice, ‘*quite* comfortable! Suits us both to perfection.’

‘The chair is like all the others,’ said Lady Hilbourne, stiffly. ‘Do you find it does not suit you, Lady Jones?’

‘Oh, entirely, entirely, what could be wrong with it?’ cried poor Lady Jones, bewildered at having apparently offended. She burst into a nervous paean of not very sincere compliments, full of little bobs and bows to the young lady’s rather intimidating gathering of relatives—at the prospect of having dear Lyneth at Plas Dar as their daughter. ‘So long we have known her as a—most welcome—visitor. Have we not, my dear?’

Lyneth wore her prettiest dress for the evening, white frills and flounces frothing out over tight little bows of pink ribbon, holding all in place. Christine wore white also, devoid of all colour so that it was she who looked like a ghost, while the real ghosts hovered, effulgent in the evening dress of Lyn’s elegant imagination. Lady Hilbourne sat at the head of the table, stiff and grim as ever in her rich brown velvet, beaded in self-colour, the scar running in its narrow bleached chasm down her cheek. Above the murmur of well-mannered dinner-table conversation, rose Sir Thomas’s complacent boom and Lady Jones’s twitterings. ‘And you’ve always been so fond of the house, of Plas Dar—have you not, my dear?’

‘Though not exactly as a two-family mansion,’ said Lyneth, looking down her pretty little nose; for across the room, Richard, having removed himself from over-close

association with Lady Jones, was going through a pantomime of horror at this threat of the bride's removal. But she felt her step-mother's scandalised face turned towards her, heard the little gasp of Christine's indrawn breath and amended, faltering: 'I mean, it is not such a very *large* house...'

'As large as Aberdar,' said Sir Thomas, riled by any reflection upon his extremely imposing mansion. 'More self-contained, perhaps, less spread about. A Palladian design,' he confided somewhat grandiosely to the assembled table, 'by the architect Sir John Soane—must have got a mint of money bringing him all the way up here, but that was no consideration...' He broke off slightly abashed and leaned back to allow Tomos (very grand these days in a uniform ordained by Tante Louise, complete with tight white cotton gloves) to place his soup plate. 'Well—I don't speak of myself—it was built before my time.' What was there in the air, he wondered, that had inspired him to so rare a show of vulgarity?

'You forget, my dear Sir Thomas, how often we have visited you there,' said Henry Hilbourne, smiling, 'delivering over to her ladyship's kind hospitality, your Lawrence's friend, our unregenerate small son.'

'Not so small these days! And now gone off abroad, poor Arthur,' said his wife, striving to speak light-heartedly, 'we can only assume for a spell of big game hunting.' She dipped a pretty little inclination of the head to the happy future mother-in-law. 'Your ladyship's gain is alas!—our loss.'

Along the high mantelshelf, Lenora's white fingers worked their way in a heavy plodding movement; and, 'Perhaps he will bring back a pair of elephant feet,' said Lyneth pertly, 'to console both the mamas—Arthur's for her

loss and Lawrence's for what she so kindly refers to as her gain.'

Lady Hilbourne sat aghast: what on earth had come to the girl? She said with little pretence at concealing her repressive intention: 'Such trophies more often than not are worked into waste-receptacles, my dear. Have a care that neither of these ladies develops an inclination to consign you to hers.'

'Will you keep me in a corner of your drawing-room, Lady Jones?' said Lyneth archly, refusing to be crushed, '— in an elephant's foot. I'm sure I should be as well accommodated there as—'

'Soup, Miss?' said Tomos deftly interrupting.

'You are serving the ladies out of turn, Tomos,' hissed the hostess, *sotto voce*. He gave her back a look from his bright, dark Welsh eyes that returned her rather smartly to her neighbourly civilities.

Lady Jones, increasingly tempted to betray indignation, was restrained by an anguished glance from her son and controlled herself sufficiently to suggest that it would be much nicer to have the little bride in the more commodious accommodation of the west wing, where they were planning a separate home for her reception. 'Quite to yourselves, my dears!' She outlined its promise to the politely attentive guests. 'The place was evidently built with some such possible future in mind: there is already in the west wing an entrance which may very well serve as their front door, leading into quite a nice little opening for a hall; so that the young people may come and go as they will.'

'It will be perfect, Mama,' said Lawrence, watching in an agony of embarrassment the clouds gather upon his lady-love's white brow. 'I've told you about it, Lyn?'

'Yes, indeed. Actually to go in and out from our own

home, without first seeking permission to pass through your parent's house. And the nice little hall! But what other cupboard will accommodate the household stores which I believe your ladyship keeps there now?"

"The stores would be removed before you were asked to use the space for any other purposes," said Sir Thomas; the tone of his voice clearly adding, "—if, indeed, after this, you are ever invited to." The three Hilbourne ladies burst forth all at the same time, with comparisons as to the convenience of smaller hallways. "And we thought we might contrive a charming little salon for you, Lyneth—" pursued poor Lady Jones, doggedly.

Lyneth interrupted. "Don't tell me, let me guess! The salon will be in what is now Sir Thomas's gun-room?"

"It is very good of my father to think of giving it up to us."

"Shall we still have your trophies hanging round the wall, Sir Thomas? The antlers and the pigs' heads—oh, dear, the boars' heads, I think I ought to say..."

Sir Thomas was by now beginning to look as though he would by no means object to featuring the young lady's head among them. The cousins exchanged scandalised glances, her family were looking daggers but helpless to stem the tide of something too much like sheer insolence to be for much longer endurable. And yet how to stem it without a positive overt reproof, embarrassing to all? And Lady Jones was plunging wretchedly on, unable to bring the terrible conversation to a graceful end. "The room can be made quite nice, dear, I am sure: you must choose your own brocades and then with a plain gold stripe in the wallpaper, I thought, to give height—"

Across the room, Richard hopped up and down with wings bent inwards, flapping. "I shall feel like a canary bird,

Lady Jones, in a gilt cage—a rather *small* gilt cage.’

Shall I be taken faint? thought Christine; what can I do to stop her? But that seemed too obviously a trick, and her mind was a blank. At the head of the table, Lady Hilbourne sat in an agony: we have not yet finished the soup course, how can we get through this terrible evening, if she continues like this? She dared not make too overt a sign of disapproval for fear of the lengths that Lyneth might go to yet. And suddenly Tomos was leaning over her, murmuring under cover of removal of her soup plate, ‘Your permission, m’lady?’

She bowed her head silently. He passed over Christine, next in line and moved on to Lyneth. Her soup was as yet untasted. ‘You have finished, Miss?’ the unaccustomed cotton gloves were uncomfortably tight perhaps, for it was not like Tomos to be unhandy; or his eyes at the critical moment were lifted to those of his mistress. He gave a startled exclamation: ‘Oh, Miss, I beg your pardon! Miss Lyn—I’m very sorry!’ and tipped the whole plateful into the young lady’s lap.

Fish quenelles followed, a variety of entree-dishes covered the corners; a pair of fine roast fowl were carried in by a Tomos outwardly wearing an aspect of abashment, inwardly complacent in her ladyship’s covert gratitude.

So far, Lyneth had made no reappearance; upstairs, changing into a different dress, struggling without assistance from a maid, since she must secretly converse with her ghosts. ‘Don’t come back to the dining-room! Please, please leave me alone! They will never forgive me. You make me say such dreadful things—’

‘The look on your face when Diccon sat down in that silly old woman’s lap!’

‘Yes, but—truly! The Jones’s will make Lawrence break

off the engagement.'

'What could be more desirable?'

'Now, Richard!' warned Lenora.

'Well, well, I suppose she must marry the clod. But she shall not go to that other house. She remains here with us.'

'If I didn't live here, you couldn't continue to haunt here,' said Lyneth, caught by a new thought.

'By the time all these decisions are made, Lyneth,' said Lenora with an edge to her voice, 'you will be in our—'

'In your power?' she said quickly, frightened by the ugly word.

'You will be ours,' said Richard, 'that is all. You won't *want* to escape from us.'

Escape! 'I could just go to Plas Dar; it would be my home. I need not come back—'

'Not come back? To this house, to your friends and your family?'

'They could come to me.'

'Bringing the whole household with them—your pets, the little dogs, all the beasts in the stables—'

'Of course, I should take Mr Rochester with me. Anyway—for the sake of half a dozen dogs and a pair of riding horses, am I to submit to being haunted all the rest of my life? A short life, I know that: many things out of the past are becoming clearer to me now.'

'Why do you struggle?' said Lenora, in the cold voice she had come to dread. 'You know very well you can never leave Aberdar Manor. The house wouldn't let you go.'

Richard came over to where Lyn stood, her arms up behind her neck, the last hook fastened. 'Don't let her frighten you, my sweeting! You provoked me and I am such an intolerant devil! I'm sorry we teased you. Go down now, go back to them, we'll leave you alone—make your pretty

little speeches, win back their good graces, agree to all their hopes and dreams about the west wing of Plas Dar. When the time comes, it will be soon enough to get your own way. Once you're married to your clodhopper as it seems you must be—they can do nothing to force you to live there: we shall keep you safe here with us...' And he put his chill wraith hands on her shoulders and gently urged her towards the door. 'Go down and make it up with them and be happy. Make them all your friends again.' To his sister, as the shivering girl slipped out of the door, closing it behind her, he said: 'Poor sweet thing—with friends like us, she will need all the true friends she can keep!'

She went slowly downstairs: stood a moment outside the door, bracing herself; went into the dining room. No one could behave more prettily than Lyneth, when she pleased. She went straight up to Lady Jones, bobbed a little curtsy. 'I'm sorry! Please forgive me! I have such a headache, I hardly knew what I was saying.' And she reached across the table for Sir Thomas's thick red hand and held it for a moment in her own. 'I'm so sorry! You know I didn't mean it. You know I love Plas Dar.' To the assembled table she bobbed a general curtsy. 'I apologise to everyone. I behaved dreadfully badly, and darling Tetty, I'm so sorry I spoiled your lovely dinner-party.' And she looked across the room with a twinkle, 'Tomos was quite right to spill the soup in my lap!' She slipped demurely into her chair and looked round at them all with a comic air of penitence. 'We shall be as cosy as anything, dear Lady Jones, in our darling store-cupboard and the gilded cage.'

'That child is an enchantress,' said the various husbands to their wives, in their pillow-talk that night.

'She is a minx,' replied the wives unhesitatingly. What soft fools men could be!

Despite all these *amendes honorables*, it was not to be expected that she could escape an inquest. The aunts and uncles had stayed the night, but as soon as they had driven away, she was sent for to Lady Hilbourne's sitting-room; and now her tormentors were in attendance again. 'Well, really, Tetty, I know I was naughty but to be expected to live in a broom-cupboard!—a young married lady to consider herself lucky to go in and out of her home without seeking permission... Was I to bear it like a simpering miss from a book by Charles Dickens?'

'It was a strain,' said Christine loyally. 'She was naturally shy.'

'Shy! She has known them all from her babyhood. If I had not brought you up to know better, Lyneth, I should suspect you of having drunk too much of Mr Weston's good wine.'

'Well, well, how literary we become! You top my Dickens with Miss Austen. You'll accuse me next, I daresay, of behaving like a Trollope—without the final letter.'

'Lyneth, how dare you—?'

'Well, don't nag at me, Tetty. We had just sat down to table, how could I have drunk too much wine? It was not at all easy, all those massed relatives looking me over, and Lawrence all eyes and anguish to see his loved one behave so ungraciously, his mama so horrified. But when she sat down on Diccon's lap, oh, dear, I thought I should have died of...' She broke off, looking scared. 'On that wobbly chair, of course I mean.'

'I don't know what's the matter with you. The chair is as safe as any other. You are talking sheer nonsense.'

'I am talking nonsense to take the black look off your face. I behaved like an angel as soon as they left me alone—as soon as you and Christine left off, I mean, with your

covert hints and nid-noddings.’ She caught sight of Christine’s face, the doubt and dread on it, and thought she must escape from one moment more of questioning. ‘This has all brought on a headache and I’ll forego eating up last night’s left-overs, if you will excuse me now, Tetty, from any more lecturing, and go to bed early...’

And they will come again, she thought, and last night’s terrors will be forgotten... But she knew that by herself they would never now be entirely forgotten: that a knowledge had entered her soul of what was yet to be: that behind the laughter and the flattery and the petting—lay the seeds of her doom.

That night, however, Lady Hilbourne descended to listen outside Lyneth’s door. Christine, bent upon the same errand, found her there. ‘Tetty?’

‘I was just hoping she’d got off to sleep. Really, last night and again this evening when I spoke to her—she was not herself.’

They spoke in whispers. ‘Well, darling—it’s been a trying two days for her. One can only hope,’ said Christine, ‘that Lady Jones gets over it. I don’t think she quite accepted Lyn’s pretty little apologies. Suppose she doesn’t really forgive her, suppose she refuses to have her living at Plas Dar!’

‘*Tant mieux*,’ said her ladyship tartly. ‘If she doesn’t want Lyn there, Lawrence can just move in here and we’ll all be together still.’

No one wonders, thought Christine sadly, how much I should like that: to live side by side with my sister’s happy bridegroom. She stood when her step-mother had left her, with her fisted hands against Lyneth’s door, leaning her forehead upon them. All my life! All my life! Smirking and

posturing through this agony, for all the rest of my life! She would try, she would direct her heart towards other men, she would not sit like patience on a monument, hugging her grief to her; but if she must live in the same house with him, day by day...

Perhaps Sir Thomas's sister may move from Plas Dardow house, she thought, and let them live there. That Sir Thomas, still strong and virile, would make way for his son was in the last degree unlikely—and why should they build a new home for the couple, when there was but the one son, and so much room in the main mansion? But Lyneth won't put up with it, she told herself wretchedly, if she's not frankly and fully loved and accepted there; she's too much used to being queen here. She will insist on their making their home at Aberdar. A thought rose in her which she would not call hope, that Lawrence might refuse, and so... But Lawrence was caught fast in Lyneth's innocent net; his heart was like her own and once enchained would never go free. It reduces him, she thought, it weakens him. He will do whatever Lyn wants, he's so much afraid of losing her. Well, I must bear it. If I have been able to live through the past months and endure, well, I can go on. Meanwhile she stood pressing her ear against the door. Let's hope she's happily asleep.

Within, Lyneth's voice, kept low, protested: You did it to scare me!' and after a silence, 'But I was only teasing when I said I wasn't interested...' and again, 'Yes, of course I welcome your return... Of course, I welcome...' And a little cry of agonised protest, 'But I can't!' And: 'Of course I couldn't refuse to love him now!' And, yet again: 'But I'm promised to him!'

She opened the door softly. 'Lyn? Are you dreaming again? Are you having a nightmare?'

Propped up against the pillows as she had been that other time. ‘Oh, Lyneth—you haven’t even gone to bed properly! No wonder you dream and talk...’

She looked pale tonight, not glowing as she had on the first occasion. She said irritably, ‘Yes, well Christine, do leave me alone! I sleep best when I’m sitting up against the pillows.’

‘Well, *I* don’t, next door,’ said Christine. ‘You chat away at the top of your voice. Come, darling, lie down and really rest.’

‘I’m all right as I am.’

‘Well, if you *want* these dreams—’

Her eyes darted, as though she were frightened, about the room. ‘Yes, I do want these dreams, as you call them. I do want them, I welcome them. Do go, Christine! You’ll frighten them away. Well, I mean that you frighten *me*, pouncing in like this at all hours of the night. If I’m keeping you awake next door, very well, I’ll talk in a whisper—I’ll teach myself in my dreams that any talking I do must be in a whisper—or my sister will come waking me up to ask me if I’m asleep, such a splendid recipe for giving anyone a restful night!’ She added quite savagely, ‘So please go away, go back to bed; and think yourself lucky if you get a few dreams like mine.’

‘I don’t think I want any dreams like yours,’ said Christine, staring back at her sister with fear in her eyes; and crept back to her room.

‘She is very close to us,’ said Richard, looking after her compassionately.

‘A little too close for comfort,’ said Lenora, frowning. Still—what could Christine do? They had their victim safe.

CHAPTER 15

SUMMER FADED AND THE autumn came, and with the changing of the seasons, there seemed to be changes also in the pretty little bride-to-be at Aberdar Manor. Lawrence sought out Christine. 'Will you come riding with me? Lyneth won't ride these days, she seems to prefer to stay at home.' Leading his own horse, he walked with her down to the stables.

'It's just that she's caught up with Tetty and Tante Louise, Lawrence dear, over the wedding arrangements.'

'I begin to wonder, Christine, whether she cares for the wedding arrangements at all—or indeed for the wedding.'

'Oh, Lawrence, you know how happy she is!'

'She doesn't seem so very happy with *me*,' he said. 'She seems hardly to listen to what I say, looks about her, smiles when there seems to be nothing to amuse her.' He explained wretchedly: 'My mother is—quite alarmed about her. She thinks she—well, Lyn does behave oddly, sometimes she seems quite hysterical; and now she has come to think that my mother is against her and refuses to visit her at all.'

Christine had already prepared for riding, her horse was waiting. They picked their way down across the terraces to the stream, across the stepping stones, up the path on the other side, the horses, accustomed, following the way without attention from their riders. 'Well, I won't pretend not to know, Lawrence, that Lyn is shy of Plas Dar. But you know what a pet we make of her, here—she must be queen everywhere, and she doesn't understand it if people are—well critical.'

'She can't help it if everyone spoils her. It's because

she's so sweet.'

'You won't suppose that *I'm* criticising her!' said Christine. Her slender form swayed with the gentle motion of the horse, moving easily up the rising path; the inevitable little dog had been lifted up by the groom, and now sat, alert and bright-eyed, in the hollow between her knee and the pommel. She ventured: 'If you could, with delicacy, a little explain Lyneth's character to your mother. One can do anything with her, if she knows she's loved.'

'She knows she's loved by me,' said Lawrence, 'but *I* can't do anything with her. Her mind seems always to be wandering somewhere else.'

'To her trousseau and her new home, Lawrence. Any girl's mind—'

He cut her short. He said, 'She won't *have* a new home. She says she'll never leave Aberdar.'

'That's because Lady Jones—'

'It's nothing to do with my mother. Something seems to bind Lyneth to Aberdar. But, Christine, a girl has to leave her home, she has to go with her husband; the Bible itself says so, it says a woman must leave her father's tents...'

She looked down and across to where the Manor stood, squat and heavy, flanked by its chain of out-buildings, curving round the hill behind it. 'A funny old tent, Aberdar is! But of course it's our home, it's been home without a break to so many generations of our family. And you've known it all your life, too. Would you object so much to live there? There's lots of room, you could have a whole wing to yourselves, live your own lives,' (Please God! she said, in her breaking heart) 'and within sight of your windows, would be your own land, here where we are now. You and your father could work alongside together just as you've always done.' As he was silent she said sharply: 'For God's

sake, Lawrence—you're not repenting of your bargain?'

'Oh, Christine,' he said, 'I love her with all my heart! I not love her? But if *she*... I believe I should go insane.'

'I don't think people go insane,' said Christine steadily. 'Not for unrequited love.' But a thought was in the back of her mind and she knew that, if only through his mother, it must be in his. She said very deliberately: 'People thought our mother was insane: but she wasn't. She was ill, for a long time she was dying...'

'Christine!—I've suggested no such thing.' But it was true that his mother had hinted at some—mental instability—in the family. 'And—I'd better tell it all, Christine—my old nurse, after the last time she saw us together, she said that the young lady reminded her of Sir Edward's poor wife—Lyn's mother, your mother—she behaved so distraught, though I daresay she used some other word; and she said that the Aberdar servants gossiped when your mother was alive, and said that the mistress was—well, queer, she said; and cried out in her sleep and talked, till sometimes one would think there was someone in her room with her, but there was nobody there...'

'I will speak to Lyneth,' said Christine, deathly pale. 'I'll go back now.' She said quietly, unemotionally: 'But be certain you do truly love her? If there's any doubt in your mind—'

'Oh, Christine, never, never! I've given her my hand and nothing can ever change it. Whatever might happen, she's mine.' He sat slumped in the saddle, shaken by the violence of his own feelings. 'I don't think anybody could ever really understand—'

She said with a bitter irony most unlike her gentle self: 'Oh, no indeed, my dear! A faithful heart—you must be unique,' and jerked on the rein quite sharply, and turned

her horse's head for home.

She bathed and changed and sought out Lyneth in her bedroom. Her sister was sitting idly at the dressing-table.

'Lyn—I've been riding with Lawrence,' Lyneth hardly lifted her head. She said sharply: 'Once and for all, Lyn—do you love Lawrence, or do you not?'

Tears sprang to the blue eyes. 'Oh, Christine, of course I do, of course I love him.'

'You have a curious way of showing it. Lawrence is troubled; we are all troubled, everyone remarks it, Lady Jones is for ever in tears, it seems, the servants are gossiping. And they talk about our mother too, Lyn, it's the old story. Do you want the world saying that you're unbalanced in your mind?'

'Oh, God, Christine!' She crouched on the dressing-table stool, looking up in terror at her sister. 'You see—nobody could believe me, nobody could understand... I'm not mad, I'm *not* mad. It's just that there's—somebody—'

Christine's heart sank. 'Somebody?' she gave a wild little laugh. Well—in fact nobody. No *body*—'

Christine gazed back at her as wildly. 'You mean—some emanation, something out of the past—?'

'There has been a curse on this house, Christine; and now it turns its powers upon *me*. This—this person—'

And he was there. 'Lyneth! You have sworn to us. If you tell anyone... If Lenora knows of this...' He threw out his hand towards Christine, standing bewildered and terrified at her sister's side. Lyneth sobbed: 'Christine, please go! Please go!'

'How can I go, darling, and leave you alone?'

Lyneth fell forward, pillowing her face in her arms, bitterly weeping. 'Oh, darling,' she said, sobbing, 'can't you

see that I'm not alone, I'll never be alone again...' And she begged once more: 'It will be much worse for me if you don't go.'

Lenora slipped in as Christine dragged herself to the door. She said in a voice of ugly rage: 'You are quite right, Lyneth. It will be much worse for you if you start foolish confidences to your sister. You forget that she may not hear us, but she hears what you say to us.'

'And catches faint echoes of our voices,' said Richard. 'She's too near us, Lenora. It's this business of being an identical twin...'

'It's a pity the other wasn't the bride,' said Lenora, almost savagely. 'She might have been more amenable than this silly little bitch.'

'But then she wouldn't have been so unhappy, my dear sister—and that wouldn't have suited you, would it?'

'It wouldn't have suited the Anathema,' said Lenora. But she suddenly changed tack. 'Come, Lyn, my pretty one, this talk is above your innocent head. Cheer up, no harm shall come to you; you shall marry your dull, clodhopping young man with his eyes like a spaniel dog—indeed marry you must, to carry on the line. But you mustn't go away with him, darling, that's all we say, to that half-home that is all he can offer you. You shall stay at Aberdar where we may be close to you.'

'But you will love me best,' insisted Richard.

She raised her tear-stained face. 'But I don't love you, Richard, I don't want to. I don't want to live all my life with ghosts, I don't want a lover who can't put real arms around me—'

'Your clod will put his arms around you,' said Richard, 'and real enough you'll find them: and soon grow sick of it, I can promise you. But Lenora and I will be here, always in

the background, no one ever gets sick of *us*.'

She cried out, almost screaming, 'But I'm sick of you *now*, sick, ill, worn out with it all. I don't *want* you in my background, it's too frightening, already people think I'm going mad. My poor mother... It was because of you—my mother lived with you as you want *me* to live with you, it was you that she talked to, you that she lived with, keeping this terrible secret till she couldn't bear it any more and so she died. And my poor father—no wonder he was always so sad and anxious, he knew there was something terrible behind it all—'

'There is nothing terrible about us,' said Lenora.

'Do you think not? There is something terrible about *you*, Lenora,' said Richard. 'Nothing matters to you but your Anathema. You put your curse on them, all these innocent girls, down through the ages—'

'For your sake, Diccon.'

'For my sake. And so I've played your merciless game with you...'

Lyneth had subsided, exhausted, laying her head on her folded arms, only half-conscious of the lowered voices. Lenora stood rigid, her head thrust forward, venomous as the head of a beautiful snake. 'You are *part* of my game, as you call it, Richard. I held you in my arms, dying—dying for love of that faithless girl, and cried aloud my Anathema, and it was for you, you were part of it, you are bound by it.' She relaxed a little. She said curiously: 'You have never felt like this before. Now and again—a little sentimentality and especially when the girl was fair-complexioned

'Like Isabella,' he said.

'Like Isabella And these two girls...' She said slowly: 'Their ancestress: and alike as they are to one another, they are alike to her.'

‘So that this strange feeling... I haven’t understood it myself, Lenora, this feeling of a living love, a human love. But Isabella—they are twin images of Isabella: and it was for love of her that I died. I died for love.’

She was silent. She said at last: ‘And—so what then? You feel a human love, you would contract a human marriage, would you, little brother? With one or other of these earthly loves of yours—these twin Isabellas: hold a girl in your arms that will not be arms but thin air around her, hold her close to your body that is chill and vaporous against her own. Do you think that will bring them happiness, whom all of a sudden you find you love so much? That other with her soul like the leaves of the Sensitive Plant, shrinking from contact with any but the one, true and ever object of her too faithful heart?—or this one, here, sick for the embraces of her clodhopper, coarse and strong?’ But it brought her to recognition of Lyneth’s presence, lying with her tear-wet cheeks against her forearms, across the pretty little dressing-table. She lowered her voice: ‘How much has she heard?’

‘I don’t understand it all,’ said Lyneth, half-drugged with terror and misery. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘We’re talking about your future, my child—which is all too tightly bound up with ours—or we have none. And your future is clear. You shall have your earthling, but to us in all but your earthly body, you belong. But outside this house, you cannot belong to us: so see that you make this clear to everyone, my child: on your marriage, your husband moves with all his possessions into this house.’ Her soft and lovely voice took on a too-well recognised note of cruelty: ‘Or else...’

Christine sought out her step-mother. 'I'm frightened about Lyneth, Tetty, I'm terrified. She looks so ill, she's so pale and her hands tremble as though she were afraid of something.'

Her ladyship sat upright at her elegant desk in the elegant room that, years ago, Madame had furnished for her own use and now was seldom permitted to enter: consultations were held in the housekeeper's room. 'Oh, poor little Lyn! But I daresay she's just caught a chill.'

'At this time of the year?'

'Well, you yourself always complain of the cold.'

'The cold is much more than we've ever accepted, Tetty. So often—and for no apparent reason... You've felt it too. The cold touch on our faces: "the hands" Lyn and I used to call it when we were little girls, cold hands brushing against our faces. You've felt the hands too. Don't pretend that you haven't. Hil says—'

'You know better, Christine, than to mention that name to me.'

'Well, it's time that I did. Hil has always believed there was something—not of this world—that threatened us, threatened the Hilbournes. He's a Hilbourne himself. We've realised that for a long time. And you married into our family—don't pretend not to understand.'

'What has this to do with your sister getting a little overheated at some time and so catching a chill?'

'I've been in her room with her when—some presence was there. More than one presence, I think—unseen, unheard, but there. Lyn was terrified, she said there was a curse on the Hilbournes, well surely this we've known, if only vaguely; we've recognised it? She sobbed and cried out that she wasn't alone, that she'd never be alone; and then the air seemed to get colder than ever, icy cold, my hands

were shaking with it; and she seemed to listen as though someone were speaking to her and then she begged me to go, she said it would be much worse for her, those were her words, much worse for her if I didn't go. And leave her alone, Tetty—with whatever, whoever—was there.'

Tetty's heart shrank within her, but the old habit of resistance was strong upon her. 'She must be in a high fever, I'll go to her...'

She said peremptorily: 'Stay here, Tetty, please. Lyneth is not in a fever. She's ill, yes—with whatever sickness our mother was ill with. And our mother talked to people who weren't there. You've heard Lyn yourself, you've heard her doing the same thing.'

'One dreads,' Hil had written to her, 'that this may be the beginning of what their father wished to avoid, when he tried to prevent the children from meeting possible future husbands.' She had gone against their father's wishes—because she knew them to coincide with Hil's; and the old, hateful words spoken at that long-ago children's party, echoed guiltily in her ears: 'Something within me tells me that one day you will betray them.'

Her heart cried out in terror, but the forces of evil that still fought within her against the essential good, as ever prevailed. 'I shall send for the doctor. This is too grave to keep it all in our hands.' Meanwhile, however, she insisted, say nothing to anyone. 'Not to anyone, Christine? You understand me?'

'I understand that you mean me not to tell Hil,' said Christine. 'But I shall tell him, Tetty. If you won't help us, we must go to his house and talk to Hil.' And upstairs, Lyneth refused all commands to remain in her bed until the doctor should come. 'I want to go with Christine and talk to Hil.'

Within her, perhaps, Lady Hilbourne was thankful. The situation had clearly gone beyond her and she was secretly terrified by her powerlessness to help or even to understand what was happening to her treasured darling—to her two darlings, for still in that beaten and darkened heart of hers, there remained a total devotion to her two lovely girls. Horses were brought to the door, small dogs handed up by the groom to sit perched alertly on their mistresses' knees, as the horses picked their way up the steep incline.

Hil came out to meet them and they slid from the saddles and stood with him, the little dogs scampering about their feet, the horses nibbling at the grass along the pathway—looking out over the wide domain of the manor of Aberdar with its fields and copses, its far-away farms, its comfortably grazing cattle, the river curving its silver way into the blue distance. With Hil there were no reserves, because there was no resistance: it all came pouring out. 'They will be angry with me, Hil, if I tell. But I don't see how they can know; they've told me that they can't haunt me outside our house.'

They three of the Hilbourne blood: it was within them to apprehend and accept. 'Your father saw them, Lyn, or dreamed that he saw them. But he remembered nothing; only that there had been a dream. But the long family history—we recognised between us what must have been some malediction on the children of each generation as the years went by. That's why he didn't want you to marry and carry on the line.'

'It's something to do with our ancestress, Isabella; the one with the big memorial in the church. There's a portrait of her at Aberdar, "on her marriage". She looks exactly like us.'

He said thoughtfully: 'She was the first of these young

girls to come to grief. Her husband was killed in the first year of their marriage—John Lloyd, he was: those fields over there were part of his manor. She died when her twins were born,’ Hil continued. ‘There are quite a few twins in the family tree.’

‘She looked exactly like us, you and me, Christine; that’s what—They were saying today. We take after Isabella. That’s why Richard sort of loves me. He doesn’t usually love people, he can’t, he’s a ghost and he has no heart, he doesn’t mind if the girls marry. But he doesn’t want *me* to marry, it’s Lenora who says I must, so as to carry on the line.’ She said to Christine: ‘And I think he loves you too.’

‘He loves *me*?’

‘Because of your looking like Isabella. He saw you before he saw me.’

‘And I saw him,’ said Christine, struck suddenly by the memory. ‘On the night of our party, when you—when you and Lawrence were engaged. I saw him and the sister, I remember now that I told Tetty and we couldn’t think who they could be.’

‘He sort of fell in love with you—seeing you first. I think he rather hopes,’ said Lyn guilelessly, ‘that if he could keep me to himself, Lawrence would turn back to you, Christine, and you two would have children for them to haunt in their turn. And perhaps Lawrence would?—he only loved me best because I—well, I took him away from you, I tried to make him love me best.’

‘He does love you best now, Lyneth,’ said Christine slowly.

‘And I love him too,’ said Lyneth, beginning to cry. ‘I know I didn’t show it but that was because they—teased me and made me be horrid to him; but I do love him really, I

shall die if I can't marry him. Oh, Christine...!'

Is it true, thought Christine, that if he could never have Lyn, he would come back to me? And her heart turned over at the thought of it, the thought that after so much suffering, all this agony of silent endurance, she might yet have him for her own, the one true love for her in all the world. And I need do nothing, she thought; I needn't work and allure as Lyn did to take him away from me. I have only to wait; indeed, what can I do but wait?—it's all out of my hands...

Across the little stream, far down below them, the woodland path leading up through the Plas Dar woodlands, that path where she had ridden with Lawrence alone and he had told her of Lyneth's coldness and said... His voice seemed to echo at this moment, clearly in her ear: 'Oh, Christine—I love her with all my heart. *I* not love her? But if *she*... I believe I should go insane.' She said now, quietly and steadily: 'I know that Lawrence loves you, Lyn. He would never turn to any other girl.'

'Except you, Christine. We both know that he hardly knew which of us to love, lots of our admirers have been the same, hardly knowing the difference between us. Richard recognises that, he says that Lawrence might as well love you as love me. I mean, they only chose me because I was the one who was going to marry.'

'Yet *he* chose you,' said Hil. 'And puts up this struggle to keep you.'

'Because of me marrying, having a family,' insisted Lyneth, 'to carry on the line.'

CHAPTER 16

LYNETH HAD BEEN RIGHT. The ghosts appeared in her room again that night and it was clear that no hint had reached them of that conversation with her sister and Hil at that little house up above Aberdar. Nor had they been angry or threatening as they had been before; more likely that they had agreed upon a return to their first approach, happy and smiling, admiring, delighted, tenderly teasing. 'But something they did let slip, Christine. I realise now that they can't haunt unless I'm actually present...'

Christine stood staring unseeingly out of the window of their sitting-room upstairs. She said, not replying directly: 'You're going to Plas Dar today, Lyn, are you?'

'Aren't you coming with me? Do come, Christine, and protect me. Lady J. wants to go over these wretched rooms again, to be set aside for us, when Lawrence and I are married. I dare not tell her that we shan't be using them.'

'Lyn, darling—'

'Don't argue, Christine. What's the use? We know it all now, more clearly: the house wouldn't let me go. Papa tried to take us away, Tetty tried to take us away: but Aberdar Manor is on Their side, Christine—Papa died, there was the fire, you and I became ill and couldn't be moved—they wouldn't let us go. I can never leave here.'

'What can you say to Lady Jones?'

'Simply agree that it's all splendid, and only when I've got him safely, play missish and just refuse to budge. If I ever do get him safely,' she added, sadly.

'Well, I think it's best that you and Lawrence should be with Lady J. alone. I'm not very good at making faces and

living through lies.'

But her reasons went deeper and as soon as her sister had started off with Lawrence on the way to the Plas, she sought out Tetty. Tetty looked up from a desk spread with notes and jottings, lists of tradesmen, of outside staff for hire, of wedding guests—and was shocked by what she saw. 'Christine—what is wrong? You are so pale.'

'Never mind that. I must talk to you—'

'Well then, take a chair. You look really ill. You are suffering my poor darling child, don't suppose that I don't see that.'

'If I suffer, Tetty, it's to some extent your fault—'

'My fault? That you are in love with your sister's lover?' She ignored the proffered chair, stood very straight beside the desk, the lovely young face grown cold and stern. 'I am in love with my own lover. He was *my* lover—Lyneth stole him from me. And you connived at it. You wanted your pet to have her way—as always.'

'Christine—don't speak to me like that; don't dare!'

'Don't dare? I do dare. I've got to dare now. You did me a wrong; all the other things, I haven't cared about, but this was everything in the world to me—'

'How could I know that your heart was so set on this boy? You were a child—'

'I'm not a child now,' said Christine. 'No one could suffer as I have and still be a child. And you could have saved me, a word here, a little encouragement there—you know how to manage Lyneth—and without one serious pang on her part, she could have turned to any of a dozen others and left my one love to me. But no—it's the pink and blue ribbons all over again, from the first day that you came here; it's the black pony against the white, the dolls on the Christmas tree, it's every treat or dress or bonnet we've ever

argued over, it's the lace dress and the dress with the flounces on the evening Lyneth began her flirtation with Lawrence—with your pet winning every time.'

'And all these years, you've harboured this resentment?'

'I've harboured no resentment, none. They were all small, petty wrongs and they did me no harm. But I think they did Lyneth harm, she became so used to it that nothing must ever stand in her way. And this time it *has* done me harm, it's done both of us harm, irreparable harm. But I'll tell you something—it has done you the most harm of all. Because it's brought disaster to her which, if you'd left things alone would have fallen on *me*. You'd have cared about that, but you care more about her; and it's your fault that she is the one to suffer now.'

Tetty sat absolutely rigid in her chair, her face almost as white as Christine's. She said: 'You've found out something, Christine? Some truth?'

'Lyneth has told me. She's explained everything.'

'To you? Not to me? But—what is it? Tell me what she's told you!' She implored: 'Christine—I'm in agony—'

'No, Tetty,' said Christine. 'I won't tell you. In two minutes, you'd have us both in bed and the doctor sent for; poor dears, a little chill, high fever, don't know what they're saying... You just wouldn't understand. And it's not that you couldn't; you don't want to accept that there's anything wrong: anything—other worldly. And the reason you refuse to accept it, Tetty, is that Hil *does*.'

The chair legs scraped along the polished floor; she rose to her full height, stiff, grim, ugly with outrage. 'How dare you? How dare you?'

'How dare *you*, Tetty? How dare you sacrifice our lives, Lyneth's and mine, to your own bitter prejudices? All these years, ever since my father died. I don't ask what went

wrong between you and Hil, it's no business of ours, we don't even ask ourselves. But we weren't deaf and blind, even as little girls. You married my father on his deathbed; but that can't have been all—Menna whom we loved so much, went away without even a word of explanation or goodbye and from that time on, Hil's name was not to be mentioned in your presence. Well, it's being mentioned now. Because what Lyneth told me, she told to Hil too, and Hil accepts it: I think at the back of his mind, he's always known it, only half understood it, perhaps, but understood. He has Hilbourne blood; he is—as it were disposed to accept and understand. But I've talked to him since. I went there alone, without Lyneth. And I've told him that Lyneth can be saved—perhaps can be saved. I've said...' She broke off, biting on her lip, turning away her head. 'Well—anyway, I've asked him to help me. But he blankly refuses.'

'Refuses?'

'Yes. And so I want you to come with me, Tetty, and persuade him.'

'Persuade him? Persuade Hil?' She choked out: 'Why should I agree with something that he refuses?'

'Well, you always do, don't you?' said Christine. 'Or the other way about.' But as her step-mother turned away from her, angrily, she amended: 'But it's more than that now: much more. Hil loves me as much as he loves Lyneth: and you don't.'

A tap at the door and Tante Louise poked in her coiffured head. Lady Hilbourne stood rigid, back turned: Christine said, 'Not now, Tante, if you wouldn't mind.'

'But I want only—'

Christine took her by the arm and urged her gently outside the door. 'It will have to wait, Tante Louise...'

'Is something wrong, Christine? Is something not well?'

‘Nothing is very well, *ma tante*, is it? You must have seen that, these last days?’

‘My poor Lyneth. She regrets now *les fiançailles*? I am not so sorry: I have told her, she can make the marriage of magnificence, formidable!—but no, she would have this Lawrence, we all give her what she wish and what result?—she is pale, she weeps, she sleeps not well in her bed, the whole house is upset. Let her then give up, if she regrets; then you, my poor child, may be happy and she also...’

‘It’s nothing like that, Tante. Simply that—well, many girls are unsettled when they take such a serious step?’

Madame Devalle caught at her hand. ‘It is more than this, Christine. The servants talk. They say—that old woman who comes up from the *village pour la blanchisserie*, she remembers the mother, this poor Anne—*enfin*, your mother also, *ma chère*; coming here as gay and sweet as *la petite*, and then the change, pale, *un peu hystérique, beaucoup de larmes*; and before that, she says, *cette vieille*—avec la *grand-mère*, the same thing, she remembers from childhood and all in the village speaking and saying it is always the same, no happiness for these young girls at Aberdar. I think it was for this that your Papa wished not for his daughters to mix with the world, to meet the young men, to bring unhappiness in marriage...’

‘Yes, well...’ She said helplessly: ‘These are strange things, Tante Louise, a little beyond our understanding.’

‘None can understand I think, Christine, who are outside the family. And who now is left? She—milady—and I, we are not of the Hilbournes. There is left only you and Lyneth—and Monsieur Hil. Hil understands: he is the deep one, that. They think it was for this that he married—’ She broke off short. ‘Well—*n’importe*...’

‘Hil—married? Hil’s never been married, Tante Louise?’

‘Oh, well, no, darling, I did not mean to say. It is all nothing.’

‘But it isn’t nothing, Tante. It’s—it may be terribly important. You must tell me. I don’t ask just out of curiosity.’

‘You had not the idea? But of course, true, it was kept to be big secret till Mees came back and then after that—Menna is gone...’

‘But Hil? Married? When? What has this to do with Menna?’

‘Oh, Christine!—I shall be for trouble!’ She glanced uneasily at the closed door.

‘Tetty. Why should *she* mind? Unless... Tante Louise, you must tell me now. We were small children, it all passed over our heads and since then, it’s never spoken of. No one need ever discover that I haven’t known it all along. But you must tell me. You don’t mean that Tetty—?’

‘Oh, my dear—how to say? Well... Well, we all thought this, she had big eyes for him, they were together, I don’t know where, but some idea that they were working for your Papa. And then she went away to that Greateaks, and when she returned—pouf! it is all finish. And she marry with your father... And she speaks again with Monsieur Hil never more.’

‘*Because* she married my father? But then you say that he was married, Hil was? Not to Menna?’

‘Oh, Christine! I should not say. But it was before Mees came back, Hil is married, very much secret, nobody knowing but Tomos perhaps, he was a friend of her. But then Mademoiselle returns and *zut!* that very same night, Menna must be gone. All is arranged, *ce mariage* of the governess with the Squire: your papa is close to die. She comes from his bedside and her face is like white stone and,

“Madame,” she say to me, “at once dismiss the cook.” Her first words. She is married with the Squire, she is my ladyship. Two hour and she is a widow. And her first words—“Dismiss the cook!” And then, “I will speak more later,” she says, and she goes to your papa’s room, she goes to the library, alone. Well, she did speak more, many times, but not of poor Menna. For me—ah Christine, now she becomes ladyship, if ever I have behave to her as if she was only gouvernante, *ella m’a remboursée en plein.*’

‘But Menna?’

‘I send for Menna. “Oh, Madame,” they say, “Menna is gone. A note came from her, she read, she is gone.” And of course all the house is in uprising, your father is dead, the funeral, *tout ça*; and the new one so high and mighty, grim, *effrayante*, I tell you ma chère, like a *Méduse*... And no time to think about Menna, for ask questions...’

‘Oh, Tante, we have never known this, Lyneth and I; how strange it all is, how strange! Menna?—but Menna was much older than Hil, old enough to be his mother. I mean, she was so sweet and lovely, I remember her well, so pretty and kind; but she was *old*.’

‘To you she seem old, you were a young child. She was not so old, this Menna.’

‘But too old to marry Hil.’

‘Too old for bear the children, my dear. Is this not what I have said? Your father has spoken much with him while Mees is away; your father, he wished for no more children at Aberdar, he thought—*eh bien*, I don’t know how he thought, Christine, but it is true that for young girls that is not a happy house.’

And then... Pages torn out of a book, papers selected from a bunch of old records. ‘One of the maids—she brought to me pieces of paper, half-burnt, not quite...’ (‘I

have in my drawer, Olwen, a pretty little piece of ribbon...’ And there had been a gift of three shillings, half of which must be spent on the purchase of handkersneefs.) ‘I could not make out all, Christine. But the old Squire, your grandfather, who can blame him, poor man? His wife always ill, they say, from the marriage day and a man must have—well, when you yourself marry, you will understand all, *ma chère*. So there were many girls. And Menna, you see—sixteen years of age... The paper burnt so thin and black, but still you could see the letters like silver. “Deliver of a child...” ’

There was a sort of—awareness—in the house nowadays, a sort of other-worldly perception. A child born to Menna. And years later, Menna secretly married to Hil, a woman old enough... Old enough to be... Gradually, hideously, a light began to dawn. She gasped out, ‘Oh, no! Dear God, no!’

‘Oh, Christine,’ said Tante Louise, ‘you will not let anyone know how much I have told?’

But to an ear made acute, a mind honed by suffering to a quivering point of percipience—Madame herself did not know how much she had told.

Tomos! Tomos will explain to me, he’ll help me, thought Christine. She put her head in at the door of her step-mother’s sitting-room. ‘I’ll be with you in a moment, Tetty, I’m—just getting rid of the aunt.’ She waited for no reply but backed out, closing the door behind her.

Tomos was perched on a high stool in his silver pantry, lovingly burnishing the branched candlesticks that nightly illuminated her childhood. ‘You must help me. I have to know... Tell me about it, Tomos, Menna. Hil married her?’

‘Ay well, if you already know about it. Yes—very quiet

it was, only I was there—we was always good friends, Menna and I. And her brother came up from South Wales. No one else knew.'

'Why so secret?'

'Well... The Squire was dying, Miss Christine: Hil had promised him. He would do anything for Squire, would Hil; they loved one another like—like—'

'Like two brothers. We guessed that long ago, Lyn and I. We never said anything.'

'Everyone guesses, I dare say. No one ever says anything. Everybody respects him. But as I say, it was a death-bed promise; no one would want to make it seem like that, a marriage not made between them two alone: and yet it must be soon, the Squire wished it done before he died. I've wondered a bit,' said Tomos, his eyes on the candlestick, 'if it was in his mind that, if Hil was still free, Miss Tetterman—her ladyship as she is now—might not be so ready to *become* her ladyship. And only as her ladyship could she have responsibility for you and Miss Lyneth, over the heads of Mr Henry and Mr John.'

'Tetty—and Hil?'

He shrugged. 'I only say that I wondered... But any rate, he and Menna were married and that afternoon, Miss Tetterman comes back from Lady Arden's and she goes almost immediately up to the house, to see Hil; and comes back again. I opened the door to her and dear God, Miss Christine!—she looked like—she'd changed, I don't know what had been said there but she'd changed; she never looked the same again, nor was the same again. And they was all waiting, the lawyer and all of them, and while they're in Squire's room, a note comes for Menna. She showed me the note, only to me—like I said, we was friends. She must go away, he said; he had learned

something, it had all been a terrible mistake, he must never see her again, she must go at once, this very night. Her brother would be still in the village, he would take her home. He said he would leave, himself, but he thought she would be sent away; and in that case, he felt he must stay, on account of the children. He said she must regard herself as not married, there hadn't been no marriage, he said what he'd heard had made it—some expression—'

'Null and void?'

'That would be it. He said he'd send her money, he said she must accept it because through him she lost her place and her home and her friends. He said something terrible for her, Miss Christine: he said he dare not even send her his love.'

'He had "learned something". From Tetty?'

'No one else had seen him. We all parted after the marriage—still keeping it secret, like I say. He was alone in his house.'

'Tetty told him something. Something dreadful, that made his marriage null and void. Tomos—do *you* believe that Tetty was in love with Hil?'

'Sick with it,' said Tomos briefly. But his mind was with Menna. 'She was, like, dazed; didn't know what was wrong, only knew that he told her to go, so she'd go. I got out the dogcart and took her down to the village. I never heard from her again, but her brother, he's written to me now and again—us being both Welshmen and from the south. He's been bitter; all these years she's moped, he says, and pined, not knowing how she should be sent away like that and without a kind word.' His eyes filled with the easy Welsh tears. 'She was a simple woman, poor sweet Menna; she would simply accept, but it lost her all her happy life here, sent her back among strangers, and she has grieved. And

now she is ill, he says. And she isn't young, Menna: all this was long ago.'

'It seems so strange that Hil should give her no reason. And should say that "he dare not even send her his love". Tomos,' said Christine, slowly, one hand gripped till the knuckles were blanched to ivory on the edge of the polished shelf, 'is it true that long ago, Menna had a child? My grandfather—'

'Ay, well, all his sins be forgiven him! He was like a madman after—well, poor lady, from the very time of her marriage, she seemed to fall ill. And at last came the one child, that was your father, Miss Christine. But meanwhile... He was always a wild young man, and he had such a way with women, no girl could resist him. And with three of these girls... Poor Squire—in wedlock just the one delicate boy; and then no more. What a thriving fine young family he might have had!'

'But these girls—having babies. Everyone must have known?'

'Village people don't take much account of these things, Miss Christine. In many families, a boy will not marry a girl until she conceives a child: they want to know that she's able for it. And the Squire—in a way, there was a sort of honour in it; and everyone loved him. And he was good to them. There was a midwife in one of the villages about here, not our own village: long dead she is now—and if a girl came with child, she would take her in, a place would be arranged and before the mother could learn to love it, the baby would be taken away to its new home, and she free to start her life again. Menna often talked about these things with me, we was always good friends. Not more than that, Miss Christine, she was older than me, but us both being here at Aberdar for so long together—always close

friends. Well, so then—first there was a girl called Jane and when she fell in the family way, then there was Menna, and another girl followed Menna in her turn, and she also came in the family way and when the baby was born, poor girl, she died. And that child he treated different, sent him to be reared and educated like a gentleman...’

‘And so brought him back to Aberdar?’

‘Ah, no, Squire was long dead by then: so shocked that just for his taking his pleasure of her, the girl lost her life, that he took wilder than ever, rode his horse about the countryside like a madman, and so at last broke his neck leaping the brook: and drowned there and that was the end. It was your father brought Hil here, when they were both young men: being his brother, like.’ He added indifferently: ‘And out of the three children, him being the only boy.’

CHAPTER 17

THE ERECT, SPARE FIGURE still stood, outlined against the many small, square panes of the mullioned window. 'Where on earth have you been, Christine? Your aunt has been plaguing me—'

'About what?' she said quickly.

'Household trivialities. What have you been doing?'

'I've been making arrangements. I've ordered the dog-cart, Tetty. We are going up to see Hil. I've sent to tell him.' She interrupted angry protest. 'No one will know—I've said that we want to take a drive,' and again over-rode argument. 'You think I know nothing, Tetty, but it's you who don't understand—or you won't allow yourself to accept it. That Hil married Menna for one reason only—to make it past his power to ask you to marry him and so bring into the world another generation of doomed Hilbournes.' Again she brushed aside interruption. 'And—something else I think you don't understand but I won't speak of that—not yet. Now please say nothing, I won't listen to anything. Get your things. You and I are going out—for a drive in the dog-cart.'

Hil's house had been reconstructed from two ancient cottages, filled with his own choice of simple furniture carved by generations of local craftsmen. Lady Hilbourne stepped inside, white-lipped after so many years of estrangement from a home that she had once prayed with all her heart might come to be her own. He bowed her silently to a chair, not offering to touch her hand. Christine

said: 'Tetty has agreed to come and try to persuade you, Hil, to agree to what I suggested to you earlier today.'

He poured a glass of Madeira, handed it to her to pass on to her ladyship. 'Lady Hilbourne will have no more success than in the past twelve years I have ever had in any attempt to persuade *her* to anything.'

Tetty rose from the tall wooden saddle-back chair. 'As I find my present situation extremely objectionable,' she said, 'and apparently am to be given no hint of what the conversation is to be about, I may as well take my departure.'

He raised his voice above hers. He said with a deep anger: 'Sit down again! The time is past for your bitter games at the expense of these two helpless girls.' She sank back into the chair almost as though in fear that his hand had been raised to strike her. 'You have betrayed them as long ago I foretold that you would,' he said. 'Now the time has come for you to make such amends as you may—to Christine, at least. She has conceived a plan. For my part, I utterly refuse to accept it; and if you have one shred left in you of the gentle heart that once you had—'

'It was you that turned it to stone,' said Tetty.'

'—you will reject it, too. Christine—?'

Christine stood between them. She spoke very quietly and calmly, but her hands were gripped together tightly to keep them from shaking. She said: 'Please don't be angry; don't be angry with one another. Just for once—let your minds turn only to Lyn and me.' To Tetty she said: 'Please listen to me, Tetty, with an open mind. There are forces in the world which we don't understand but which we have to accept. In our world at least, in the world of the Hilbournes, we have to accept them; and at last a time has come when we understand them. Lyneth understands it all, she knows;

and she has told what she knows to Hil and me. You will refuse to believe it because you don't want to believe it—but it is true. A curse was laid upon this branch of the family long ago, in the days of Queen Elizabeth—a malediction—'

A dream. Long long ago, a dream whose message, unrecollected, through all the years had haunted her mind. She said, stammering, 'Yes. It was... I dreamed. They were... In the old library—so beautiful, they were so beautiful then... When I woke, I found that I had knocked over a glass at my hand.' She said, staring ahead of her as though stupified: 'I remember that I thought the spilt wine was blood.'

'Oh, Tetty! You saw them?'

'A dream. I thought it was a dream. I'd been asleep and dreaming. It had all been—such a terrible day, so strange and terrible, I thought I'd fallen asleep—or fainted. But I forgot what the dreams had been about.'

'I believe that you saw them, Tetty. Lenora and—'

'—and Diccon,' said Lady Hilbourne.

'Oh, God, Tetty—yes! You did see them. She does call him Diccon.'

'The Squire,' said Hil, and he also could hardly control his voice. 'He dreamed... In that same room, he dreamed and when he awoke, he too thought that the spilt wine was blood.'

'It was the night he died,' said Tetty. 'The night I myself married into the Hilbourne family. I dreamed...' And she seemed almost to dream again. 'She cried out... She held him in her arms, he was lying across her knees and the blood stained all her dress and dripped down... Dripped down... He had red ribbons on his shoes and the blood dripped down on to the red ribbons... And she lifted up her

head and cried out—howled like a dog, lifting up her head and howling it out like a dog! A curse, she said, a curse! An anathema. Never in all the years to come, should there be...

‘Never again,’ said Christine, ‘should there be in the Manor of Aberdar, a happy bride.’

Hil reached for the glass of Madeira and put it into Lady Hilbourne’s hand. ‘Drink it,’ he said. ‘It has been a bad moment for you.’ He returned to his seat. ‘They appear to Lyneth,’ he said. ‘Their ghosts—Lenora and her brother, Richard. It was her Anathema. And it took many forms—no wonder we could never exactly decide its terms. Young girls died—young men died: little children died—girls seemed to go insane, lived on but in seclusion, communing with people who were not there. Not all of them of the Hilbourne blood—but having all of them one thing in common: that suffering came often through the suffering of others, to Hilbourne daughters when they married—and to other men’s daughters who married into this family, the sad, mad brides of Aberdar.’

‘Is it strange,’ said Christine, ‘that they have never appeared visibly to haunt Tetty? She was a Hilbourne bride.’

‘An hour of marriage,’ said Tetty. ‘And God knows, *unseen* they have haunted me. Could you ever say that *I* had been a happy Hilbourne wife?’

‘And now,’ said Christine, ‘Lyneth is a bride of Aberdar. And they are with her night and day—the ghosts. You have heard her in her room at night, Tetty—talking to them. As our mother talked to them: and all the mothers and grandmothers, back and back for two hundred and fifty years.’

Tetty said, her hand to her mouth, ‘They won’t let her

marry Lawrence?’

‘Oh, yes, she must marry—they all marry, don’t they? There must be succeeding generations to be haunted. But once married—’

‘She’ll leave the house,’ said Tetty, quickly. ‘She’ll be at Plas Dar.’ But she added, ‘Can they follow her there?’

‘No, they can’t haunt outside the Manor. But you can ask yourself,’ said Christine, ‘whether the Manor will let her go.’ She went to the window and stood staring out across the twisted chimneys of Aberdar far below, to the hillside across the stream where the chimney-pots of Plas Dar might be glimpsed among the trees. ‘So you see,’ she said, ‘she is doomed. Lyneth is doomed.’

‘I will never agree to this plan of yours, Christine,’ said Hil, violently. ‘Never, ever. It is monstrous. I will never agree to it. *Never.*’

‘That’s why I have brought Tetty here,’ said Christine. ‘To—to persuade you—to agree to it.’ To her stepmother she said, returning to where she had so quietly stood before, still gripping her hands tightly together, ‘Doomed—what a word to apply to Lyn, so gay and happy and sweet, so spoilt and petted, so totally unfitted to meet trouble and danger! But for me... Well, I won’t apply so huge a word to myself but in my own small way, I also am doomed—never to be happy again, full of hope and joy.’ She said, quickly: ‘I may have said bitter things to you, Tetty, sometimes, but I blame no one for this: not really. I bestow my idiotic love where it isn’t wanted and idiotically can’t fall out of love and I know that I never shall. It’s my fault for loving with this kind of love—I’ve written my own doom for myself. So...’ She took a deep breath. ‘So, since Lyneth has the capacity to be happy and I know that I never shall be again—why should I not simply change with her and be unhappy in her place?’

Now indeed Lady Hilbourne started up out of her chair. 'For God's sake, Christine—offer yourself to these monsters?'

'They're only monsters if they're thwarted, Tetty. I know this from Lyn. They want to force her into a sort of love for Richard: but she fights back, she's in love with Lawrence, I wouldn't fight back. What have I to lose?'

'Oh, my darling child! My heart of gold!'

'You couldn't agree to it?' said Hil, quickly. 'It's impossible.'

'Oh, dear God! Never!'

'He already has a—feeling—for me,' said Christine, disregarding them. 'He saw me, in fact, before he saw Lyn: you remember that evening, Tetty, when I told you two guests had arrived whom I didn't recognise? And he supposed that I was Lyn—the girl he had come to haunt. With our being so much alike—' She said bitterly: 'He would not be the first young man to become confused as to which of us he really loved.'

'Oh, my poor, darling child—!'

'And something very strange has happened,' said Christine, going resolutely on. 'Richard is dead, he's a ghost, and a ghost has no heart to love with. Lenora is the same—and has no heart to love with; only revenge and hate. But Richard died for love, he killed himself for love of a girl called Isabella—and Lyn and I are living images of that girl he died for. So that, in his own strange way, he has love in his heart—and so he may have it for me as well as for Lyn.'

Hil said quickly: 'But Lyn is the bride.'

'I have thought it all out,' said Christine. 'I haven't forgotten that.' Her stepmother had sat down again in her chair and she came and crouched at her knee, taking Tetty's cold hand in her own trembling hand. 'Gradually, gradually,

I must take Lyn's place. I must be with her all the time, close to her, so that Richard becomes a little confused between us. And at first sometimes, and at last always, Tetty, we must make the exchange—you must talk to me as though I were Lyneth, she and I must take over from each other, she must call me by her own name, we must change rooms and clothes, I must talk with Lawrence as though I were Lyn... That will be the hardest part,' she said, sadly, 'and I daresay for him too. To seem to love me.'

'On the contrary, my dearest, may he not be the one to fall in love with you—again.'

'God forbid,' said Christine, 'that I should do such a thing as to take him away from my sister. But he wouldn't anyway; Lawrence is like me, once he loves, he loves for ever. And don't talk too much about my heart of gold! It may seem all very fine and noble to be doing this for my sister; but I think, at bottom, I'm doing it for love of Lawrence.' She smiled, almost—grimly. 'For his sake—so that someone else may be happy with the one I love.'

Hil waited until she had finished. Then he said: 'It is utterly out of the question. I shall not allow it. I have only to go into the house—where Lyn is, they are present, listening. I shall speak out this plan of yours, and that will be the end of it.'

'Tetty?'

Lady Hilbourne wrenched her own hand from the pleading grasp. 'Oh, Christine—no! You have made sacrifices enough. This time I shall not give way.'

'Well, then... I've come not unprepared for this. So—now I will force your hand. Hil—you were faced once with something so—so terrible, so horrible, that since that day, surely, you haven't been able to look at your own face in a mirror without a sort of—loathing.' At Lady Hilbourne's cry

of repudiation, she leaped to her feet, leaned over her suddenly, cold with a fierce determination. 'Be silent, Tetty! Be silent!' To Hil, she said: 'I've been talking—asking: no one realising how much they were telling me. But I have put it all together, all these scraps of talk; and I know. You sent away poor, innocent, darling Menna, not able to give her even a sign of what your reason could be; not daring even to dismiss her with a word of love. To this day, she lives breaking her heart over your rejection, over your lack of any sort of explanation. And Hil, Menna is ill, perhaps she's dying—what if I were to tell you something so that she might at least spend her last days with her heart at peace?' He stood speechless, confounded. She clutched at her opportunity. 'Silence shall mean consent, Hil. If I make this possible—you in response will make my plan possible.' And giving him no chance to speak, she said: 'There was a—mistake. A terrible mistake. Papers were mixed up, wrong entries, I don't know. It was nobody's fault. But—you can have proof of it, assurance of it; I was told of it an hour ago, in perfect innocence... Long ago, Menna had a child. But, Hil, *your* mother died with your birth. Menna was nothing more to you than you had always believed her to be. Her child was a girl.'

CHAPTER 18

FOR A LONG, LONG time they were silent, the three of them: Hil sat forward, his elbows on his knees, his hands covering his face, wet with his tears. Tetty sat trembling, watching him; rose and went over to him at last, knelt at his feet. He raised his head, incredulous at finding her kneeling there. She said, her voice low and shaking: 'Oh, Hil!—all these sad years, what have I done to you?'

He made no direct answer, said, shuddering still, 'I could have known all this time. But how could I bring myself to go among them, in the house, in the village, in that other village where the midwife lived—asking questions, reminding them, opening out the truth—?'

'I don't ask your forgiveness, how can I? But—it wasn't I who spoke, something, some hideous force inside me—'

'Never mind now, Tetty,' said Christine. She came over and caught her step-mother by the hand. 'Get up, Tetty, leave Hil now; we'll go.'

Hil stood up. 'Christine, what have I done, letting myself be persuaded into this plan of yours? Whatever it has meant to me—'

Tetty stood with Christine in the doorway. 'As to that, Hil, don't break your heart. *You* may give your consent—but she is safe, for *I* never will. The time of playing favourites is gone: if either must suffer...' She trembled but she said steadily, 'It mustn't be Christine. She can't manage—not one moment of this terrible plan, without my help and I'll never give it, I'll speak it out in front of the ghosts as you threatened to do. I will never agree to it.'

He assisted them into the saddles, lifted up the little

dogs; with hardly a word more, they rode away down the steep path. Tetty said at last, 'Do you think he will ever forgive me? It was a mistake on my part that has ruined his life.'

'When he gets over the shock, yes,' said Christine, 'I daresay he may forgive. A mistake, he must forgive.' She looked steadily ahead of her. 'What he could never forgive, Tetty,' she said, 'would be that it had been a deliberate lie.'

'I will do anything you ask me,' said Tetty into the long, cold, terrifying silence that followed, 'to help you in your plan, Christine.'

Lyneth rebelled: fought against it, wept, utterly refused to consider such a thing: wouldn't talk about it, wouldn't discuss it, wouldn't even entertain such an idea, absolutely no, *no*, NO!

And yet, thought Lyneth, and yet—it was true that poor darling Christine would never be able to be happy because she would always love Lawrence; and after all, if you couldn't have the person you loved, Richard was so terribly handsome and delightful—if you didn't love, well, if it were no use your loving—somebody else. She herself loved Lawrence and *could* have him, so that was different. And of course the ghosts were cruel and frightening with her, but they wouldn't be with Christine, because Christine wouldn't be rebelling against their wishes. When first she, Lyneth, had known them, it had been wonderful, they'd had such fun together, such a lovely conspiracy against all the living people, such jokes. It was only when the jokes were turned against her, to make her fall out of love with Lawrence... But they wouldn't turn against Christine.

She talked at last, with desperate earnestness, to Hil, riding with him on his rounds of the manor lands; talked

with Christine; talked with Tetty: was persuaded, fell to planning, grew in a sort of innocent eagerness whose roots were deep in the ingrained selfishness of a heart too long ever-indulged. It must all be minutely and elaborately thought out: one slip and how dangerous could be this terrible game!

Positively and absolutely, the girls must exchange identities—at least until the fish had been securely hooked; and to disguise themselves was not simply a matter of exchanging pink and blue—the lockets, coral and turquoise, that she had given them, darling Tetty, at that wonderful Christmas party long ago!—that happy evening when nevertheless Hil had said to her that one day she would betray them—and, betraying, destroy them all. Not a matter nowadays of colours to differentiate. There was between them no smallest mark of difference, but servants, long used to them, had no difficulty in catching a tone or a turn of phrase or only a nuance in their approach to daily life, and recognise one from the other; and now even the servants must be deceived.

It was decided at last that Lyneth must become ‘ill’, and so keep to her room—one of those odd Hilbourne malaises, said the doctor, that seemed to attack the family, impossible of exact diagnosis; and indeed, pale and thin after the long wearing weeks of her subjection to the ghosts, it was not difficult to suppose her very unwell. Nor need she now visit Plas Dar, to the further unedification of her future mother-in-law; in a new hope of happiness in her marriage, she must ingratiate herself again in that quarter, and it was impossible while Lenora and Richard prodded and teased her.

Lady Jones received the news with mingled anxiety and relief. ‘I have not quite got over her behaviour when she

was last here, my dear,' she said to Lawrence. 'Perhaps it will be a good thing to have a few days for us both to recover ourselves. On the other hand, Lawrence, dear, she does seem very *young* to be so—so nervous and highly strung, and so easily fall ill. Her mother was so much the same, and *her* health... The family don't make old bones, my dear, it isn't promising when you think of such a stock for your children...'

Lawrence, advised by the Manor, agreed that it might be politic to absent himself for a short while from home, on a round of visits to the friends of his rapidly closing bachelor days.

So Lyneth lay languidly a-bed and Christine, apparently fearless of possible infection, was with her by day and slept on a couch at the foot of her bed by night; and for a few nights shivered and shook and gradually got used to the cold and the unease in the room and felt it less. As Lyneth had been, so it seemed was she, from the experience of many generations of family haunting, conditioned, as it were, to accept the ghosts; and gradually, gradually—faint, faint outlines growing clearer, faint, faint voices seen and heard as through a mist, through heavy veiling—becoming firmer, becoming more audible, becoming—real. It is happening, she thought to herself and her heart thrilled with terror at the growing knowledge of what she had condemned herself to. The voices came across to her, Lenora's beautiful deep velvet voice and Richard's, so tender and full of laughter: so sweet to the ear. But underneath, she thought they are cruel, they're bent on mischief, they come here only to break our hearts: all this is a charm to win us over—and so break our hearts. And she wondered what release there would be for her at last—how soon the end would come. Not for a long time, not till the endless

years had worn her down? For what was to destroy her? She had no husband to pine for, no babe to die with its birth, no worldly suffering to fear. If they should stick to the letter of their law, should abide too strictly to the rules of the anathema...? An unhappy bride, they had sworn, and she would not, after all, be a bride.

But with this generation, Lyneth now suggested, the situation had subtly shifted, for the first time the marauding ghost-lover was himself in love. If Christine could attract that love to herself—that chill, intangible, terrifying love—would they, please God! be satisfied with that?—and let them go, those two who in all the world were most dear to her. No thought that once more Lyneth was having her way and everyone around them as usual abetting her in it, ever entered the loving and generous heart. But she could not pretend to herself that she was anything but deeply afraid.

The ghosts were not pleased by the new arrangement. ‘She can’t hear *us*; but how can you speak freely, Lyneth? What joy can we have in our being together?’ Not knowing as yet that Christine could now hear them speak, they were aware that she could hear Lyn’s voice replying to them. To leave them free to express themselves, Christine curled up on the day-bed and pretended to sleep.

For the moment, Lyneth must dissemble, pretend to be a little cooler in her devotion to Lawrence; in no way failing in her intention to marry him (Lenora was adamant as to that) but more warm towards Richard. It would make them feel warmer towards *her*, warmer towards Christine—that was what mattered—when Christine came to take her place. And with Lawrence away, and no dangerous visits to Plas Dar on the horizon, it was easier—moreover, when they were not threatening, how delightful in fact they could be!

To others, the very thought of such spirits was strange and frightening, only because they were not of this world; but to her, as such, they held no terrors: she accepted them without reserve.

Lenora suggested: 'Is she put here to spy on you, Lyneth?'

That other sweet face with its look of sorrow, of courage, of goodness: the blue eyes, the silkily golden hair...'I think she is not one to lend herself to spying,' said Richard.

'Not to spy,' said Lyneth, 'but to watch me, perhaps, and try to make out from what I say when I talk in my sleep, as they call it, what's troubling me.' Tomorrow, she whispered, giggling, she would see that Christine took something to make her sleep soundly, and then they could all chatter away as much as they wished.

'We are going in for friendly chatter now, are we?' said Richard, gratified and surprised.

'Now that Lawrence has gone away,' she said, 'I feel different, I feel more free.'

'And yet, poor, dull earthy clod whom one day, you swear, you'll marry! Over my dead body!' he added, laughing. 'But in fact we need never meet people in the Other World; we see very few; only those who have been very bad in their lives, or very stupid, or—well, who have in some way deprived the Light of their bright offering. Lenora and I—we're debarred by our sins from almost all social intercourse; we must be sufficient unto ourselves.'

'Though we do sometimes bump into some of the more earth-bound, returning here to do a little haunting of their own.'

'A fine one you are, my brother, to complain of bumping! One day,' said Lenora to Lyneth, 'he actually

barged against the Queen herself, in his haste to be off somewhere! Against very Majesty in person! "You are hot to be with your mistress, are you, my young villain?" she says, and raps him across the knuckles and tells him to be off, then, and not keep Isabella waiting...'

So gay and easy, so light-heartedly chattering away to entertain and amuse. And yet, thought Christine, curled on the day-bed, anxiously listening, beneath it all the threat implicit, 'We are here, sweet Lyneth, for no purpose but eventually to break your little heart.' And this purpose must, as soon as might be, be transferred to her own. Well, my heart is broken already, she insisted to herself. What have I to lose? But to grieve was one thing; to add sick fear to a simple sorrow was something else indeed. And she knew herself to be sick unto death with fear.

Nevertheless, it must be done; and a day came when she could suggest with outward ease that her sister might leave the sickroom for a spell downstairs; and so at last propose a short ride. 'But not over to Plas Dar,' warned Richard, materialising from nowhere as they sat at the window of her ladyship's drawing-room, looking out at the thin sunshine of a late autumn day. He spoke to Lyn but Christine observed that for the briefest moment he had glanced as though for confirmation at the lockets, the coral and turquoise which to this day, for easy identification, they still wore. 'Oh, no,' she said, 'not nearly so far—' and disguised the words hastily as though she had not heard and replied. 'Not really far. Just at walking pace along the river bank...'

From that ride returned two girls 'idenkital' as once Lyneth would have said, in all but the exchange of their lockets. Christine wore the coral now; and the groom said, easily, assisting her down from her pony, in the lovely old

walled-in stable yard, 'Enjoy your ride, Miss Lyn?'

'Oh, dearest,' said the true Lyn, walking back with her towards the house, 'now it begins! Now I am you; and you —'

'And I am theirs,' said Christine, very pale.

'Dearest—even yet—'

'No, no. The whole thing is under way, we don't know what more danger it might involve if we were to go back on it.' All the same, now that the moment had come she was deeply, deeply afraid.

Lady Hilbourne met them in the hall, all three carefully rehearsed. 'Lyneth,' she said to Christine, 'you look very pale, my dear, I hope you have not overdone it?—ridden out too soon, having been so unwell.'

'No, don't trouble yourself,' said Christine. 'I'm a little tired but I'll have an hour alone in my room resting. I shall do very well.'

Two pairs of eyes watched her, anguished, as she slowly mounted the stairs, but she went on steadfastly to Lyneth's room. And they were awaiting her there.

She sat down at the dressing-table, with a shaking hand pulled off the little feathered riding-hat. Richard knelt to assist in tugging off her boots. 'Though why I should, when you go galloping away out of my reach,' he said, 'I don't know. I am powerless to come trotting after you.'

'You—you never trotted a horse in your life!' said Lenora. 'At full gallop always, hardly looking where you were going, leaping off to apologise to some poor crone for splashing her with mud—splashing mud without apology on all and sundry of others who came in your way.'

'It was for that, our aunt never forgave me—for who else spread tales to Isabella's father of my misbehaviour at

court?’

‘You were a fool, Diccon, to upset the woman—but when were you not? When did you ever give a thought to your own advantage?—Isabella’s father was right when he called me your keeper. Without me... But there was no guile in him, Lyneth,’ said Lenora, looking at him indulgently. ‘No guile at all.’

‘Yes, well... Forgive me,’ said the pretended Lyneth, faltering, ‘but I am so tired. My first outing after my—illness...’ She tried to force her voice to easy familiarity but the words stuck in her throat; she thought that once again he glanced as though vaguely puzzled at the coloured centre of the locket she now wore. She got up, pretending to move rather stiffly, from her seat. ‘So long I’ve not been riding...’

‘Lie down, child, and relax yourself,’ said Lenora, already gracefully disposed upon the little day-bed: an early wedding-gift from Tante Louise’s store of French gim-crackery, intended for the foot of a larger bed than the small four-poster with its looped-back frilly curtains. ‘Richard, help her off with her jacket. I confess,’ she added, ‘that I wish our haunting need not be confined to this house. I had a fine figure for a riding habit, Diccon, if you remember?’

‘Magnificent: an hour-glass in velvet and feathers. Even the Queen remarked upon it, Lyneth! “As well you were not at court in my father’s day! He’d have had you a-bed within the hour.” ’

‘And to the block a week later,’ said Lenora. ‘And for my part, the one as unwelcome as the other. Gross old man!’

‘He was not gross always,’ said Richard. ‘Our gran’dam to the end referred to him as The Golden Lad. Elizabeth was far less beautiful, for all her wardrobe was more

magnificent even than his.'

Christine had thrown herself down on the bed in her shirt and the divided riding skirt. Richard perched on the edge, one hand, though she felt it only as a sort of disembodied chill, lying close against her own. She said, to distract attention from her involuntary recoil: 'I don't understand about your dress...' But one must beware of repeating questions that Lyneth might already have put to them and she amended: 'I have never entirely understood how you come to be dressed as we are nowadays. You're always so elegant but in the costume of today: yet I suppose there were no tailors and dress-makers in your Other World?'

'We explained it to you before,' said Lenora. 'You see us as you expect to see people, you clothe us in your mind. In our own eyes, we wear the clothes of our own time: don't you sometimes get a whiff of that scent we used so much? Richard's leather cloak was never properly treated and stank if it wasn't well perfumed.'

'As I daresay I did myself,' said Richard, 'by present standards.'

'And so did we all. But Lyneth translates us into her own terms; and I am grateful, my love, for the elegant taste with which your mind dresses us. And, of course, in the Other World there are no clothes, as such. We are shades, we're shadows, even to one another, moving forward through the shades and shadows to the Light. Till we see ourselves gradually reassemble, as it were, in our great skirts and ruffs and capes and slashed sleeves; and then we know it's time to come back. You see us now, as you see us. But *I* see Richard in his doublet and hose, with his beautiful single earring—a great pearl drop that the Queen herself gave to him, plucking it from the bodice of her gown,

telling him to wear it to remember her by, while he was away from her. "I would, Madam, that I might lie but once as close to your heart as this happy pearl has dwelt," says our lad, brushing clean the floor with the feather of his hat, "then should I need no jewel to remember you by." Villain, villain!' said Lenora, laughing, shaking her head. 'He was at that moment in preparation to come here to Aberdar.'

'And in a fine sweat lest Her Majesty take me at my word,' said Richard, 'since I had no heart then for any but my Isabella—who proved not to be *my* Isabella after all—'

'And so you might just as well have taken up Her Majesty's invitation and found all your family splendid places at court. Though, true, as with her papa, such invitations too closely followed up,' said Lenora, 'were more likely to find your head on the block than upon her pillow.'

'And wouldn't have found us here,' said Richard, 'where I had so much rather be.' Sitting close, he lifted Christine's hand and bestowed upon it a light kiss that sent cold thrills through her veins. Crudely instructed, with many nods, winks and allusions by Tante Louise in the realities of marriage, she shivered at the thought of what strange mysteries she must undergo when she finally submitted to Richard all her will?

CHAPTER 19

NOW IT WAS CHRISTINE'S turn to absent herself as much as possible from her sister and opportunity for close comparisons between them. And gradually this transition took over, Tetty addressed her as Lyneth, Lyneth herself addressed her as Lyneth, she dressed in Lyneth's clothes, rode Lyneth's horse; called Lyneth by her own name, Christine. Tante Louise might look vaguely puzzled, at first all the staff might look vaguely puzzled, but in the end who could quarrel with the obvious facts? Nor did the ghosts seem less than accepting; they appeared not at all to the real Lyneth and already to her were becoming more remote, ever fainter outlines to her sight, ever more voices to her hearings. She and their step-mother were desperate with gratitude, Lady Hilbourne at first anxious and guilty, but coming to accept that there had been no other solution, that Christine was fated for less than happiness anyway, that it was right that one at least of her two children should know a real life; what was the point, she would say to Lyneth, wearily mulling it over, in their both suffering? 'Well, that's what *I* feel, Tetty; if it had been the other way about, I'd have done the same for Christine, wouldn't I?'

'Yes, of course you would, dearest,' said Tetty, and did not dare to ask herself if this were true. 'I feel so dreadfully worried about you, my darling,' she said to Christine, 'but as Lyn says—'

'As *Christine* says,' said Christine, correcting her easily; but with a warning look. She led away from dangerous subjects. 'You mean I have been talking again in my sleep? But what does it matter—some people do, some people

don't. I dream a lot, yes'—night after night, indeed, as the weeks crept by—'but always nice pleasant dreams, stop worrying about me! It was to Christine now that these ears listened unseen; which must be every moment deceived.

Meanwhile, active preparations for the wedding had been unobtrusively relaxed. Lady Hilbourne had written a tactful note to Lady Jones to suggest that dear Lawrence be advised to extend a little his tour of visits: young girls were kittle-kattle and dear Lyneth, though firm in her intentions, was a highly-strung creature and must perhaps be allowed a little more time to prepare herself for so great a change. Lady Jones thankfully acquiesced and the spring, rather than the coming winter, would perhaps suit everyone best. 'Though its never coming at all would suit *me* best,' she confided to Sir Thomas, in a nowadays not unusual burst of tears.

'Oh, come now, my love, you must get over her foolish behaviour that evening! How prettily she asked your pardon afterwards! I never saw anything like it. It's a splendid match, the manors running so closely side by side, though for that matter a pity that he shouldn't have stuck to the heiress. Still, this one will have a fine inheritance; and—kittle-kattle says her step-mama, well, just the word for it. These marriageable girls are much like cattle on the market, a pretty little heifer is not your great lumbering milch cow; and you'd rather have a mettlesome young racehorse, wouldn't you?—than any rough mare from the Shires, for our fine young stud?'

'There is no need to be coarse,' said her ladyship, bursting further into weeping.

'You've married a rough racehorse yourself, my love, I fear,' said Sir Thomas and gave her a pat not unlike any he might have bestowed upon the said creature; and would

hear no more.

Christine wrote a little note to Hil. 'I must speak with Tetty out of the range of my Familiars with their listening ears. If I order the carriage, and come down to the stable-yard to meet it—could you be there?' It was nowadays something of an effort for her to walk even so far but he met her half-way and gave her his arm. 'But Christine, you alarm me—what now must be said to her ladyship in so much privacy? No more, please God!—of these terrifying plans of yours?'

'Well, it is a plan; but one which in fact may abate the terrors.' She stood with him, watching as the horses were led out to the waiting carriage. 'What beauties they are! And a perfect match.'

'Her ladyship spends very little on herself; but what she has is of the very best. The best of step-daughters, however, came to her rather by chance than by choice.' Not, he said rather sternly, that he would call *them* very equally matched.

'Oh, no,' she said, in perfect innocence. 'Lyn had always been far cleverer than me: people have always admired her the most.'

'Oh, Christine—' he said, in almost comical despair.

On the cobblestones, polished smooth by the centuries of wear, hooves scraped and chuffed with the backing of the horses between the curving shafts; from the boxes all around the square yard, mild faces looked out enquiringly, soft pink noses were upwards lifted, to snuff for the scented promise of an apple to come. He watched with an abstracted air to see that the bits had been comfortably adjusted, loops and buckles fastened securely. He said: 'You have brought me here to say something particular, Christine.'

Her pale face grew shadowed. 'Yes, well... It's what I have to talk to Tetty about. Hil—something has happened. It's been happening gradually, but now I know it. With all such strange heart as he has to give—Diccon has come to giving his heart, not to Lyneth but to me.'

His own heart seemed to thud within his breast. 'What is this leading up to? For God's sake—' and he looked into her face and saw that she was white with fear. 'And so—?'

'And so I must talk to Tetty,' said Christine. She leaned her cheek for a moment against the rough sleeve of his jacket. 'I'd thought...' She said, summoning up the ghost of a smile: 'But that was foolish: no use at all, talking about it to *you*!' And she stepped up into the carriage and before he had time to protest, was driven away. He put up his hand to hide from the stablemen the thrusting tears for the helplessness, the hopelessness, the terror of it all.

Lady Hilbourne was waiting in the porch of the Manor and was duly handed in. They sat each in a corner, wrapped in warm rugs. 'So, Christine—?'

For once it was a natural cold. The oaks stood naked to the chill, their leaves heaped in their winter gold at the feet of the great dark boles; on the hillsides, the bracken was coloured the same tawny gold as the fallen leaves. In the fields, the cattle huddled close for protection, their sweet breath wreathing white in the chilly air, the sheep kept close against the rising banks beneath the hedgerows, leafless now; and in tree or bush or hedgerow, no bird sang. Only the chuff-chuff-chuff of the horses' hooves on the softened surface of the road made any sound and the squeak of leather against leather, the whirr and rumble of the turning wheels. In the closed-in darkness of the carriage, it seemed as though they drove through a world unpeopled but by themselves and they spoke in small, hushed voices as

though even they hardly existed within it. Only at the end of Christine's recital, did Tetty raise her voice. 'Never, Christine; never! I won't hear of it!'

'You are hearing of it, Tetty. And as you helped me before, you must help me now.'

'Last time you—blackmailed me.'

'And I will again.'

'Dear God!' said Tetty. 'For the rest of my life—are you going to hold that threat over my head?'

'For the rest of my life. But,' said Christine, 'that won't be for very long.'

'That is too terribly likely, Christine, if you insist upon this horrible plan of yours. But I shan't allow it. Do what you like—tell Hil what you like. In my pain and rage, I told him a lie about his birth: my excuse must be that some force within me tore out the words from me. I have thought sometimes that when I came back to Aberdar—a Hilbourne bride, in fact, whether I were to marry Hil or as it turned out your dying father—the ghosts closed in upon me, with all their malignity—'

'And turned you, yourself, into a thing malign.'

She bowed her proud head. 'Nothing you can say to me, Christine, can outdo what I have said to myself, of myself, through these long years. But that he should know...! However—I repeat, if you must tell him, tell him! I'll be blackmailed no more. I will have no part in this abomination that you propose for yourself.'

'Then we must use that word again—doomed. Lyneth is doomed—probably both of us, but certainly Lyneth is doomed to God knows what vengeance if they find out the deception we've practised upon them.'

'You didn't think of this when you began it all.'

'In fact, dear Tetty, it was you who began it all—when

you turned my little sister from a loving and giving heart to a greedy and grasping one. But, in fact, when I thought up my plan, this was already in my mind. But there was no use in my trying to demand too much of you and Hil. I let you suppose that when Lyn was safely married and moved away to Plas Dar out of their reach—I could somehow make a peace with them. Perhaps, in the back of my mind, I believed that I could: the reality would have been more than I could yet endure to contemplate. I thought, as I say—with Lyn at Plas Dar and safe, I could reveal the truth to them, ask them to accept me in her stead, haunt me, tease me, bring all the world to suppose I was mad, as they were doing to her, as they did to our mother. They would have been angry: it would mean that they'd failed in the continuance of their anathema, they'd lost the power to come here and haunt again. All that I was prepared for. But this... Even I couldn't foresee how it would go.'

'What do you mean, Christine? What do you mean?'

'It is because we are so much like his first love, Isabella—the girl he died for. It has awakened a heart in him, a sort of living, human heart, in the ghost of the dead. And this terrifying heart of his, he has lost—not to Lyneth but to me.'

'Oh, dear God—!'

'Their minds are very strange,' said Christine, ignoring the involuntary outcry of agony. 'Their minds and such hearts as they have are very strange. How should they not be? They are the minds and hearts of the people of Elizabeth's day, how could they be anything like our own? Brief periods, at long intervals, among living people, they who are dead—knowing nothing of anything outside that old manor house.' She mused over it. 'If ghosts could be said to be mad, I should say they were mad.'

Her step-mother buried her face in her gloved hands.

‘And you are at their mercy, my poor darling child.

‘Better I than Lyneth, Tetty.’ She said deliberately: ‘Don’t you agree?’ And after a little while, into the chilling silence: ‘At least you are too honest to deny it. And so I must do what I now intend to do. Remain with them as “Lyneth”—never make the exchange back. Give myself over entirely to their—mercy.’ She said again and now it was not a question: ‘Better I than Lyneth, after all.’

The habit was upon Lady Hilbourne nowadays to sit stiffly erect, to set a guard upon her eyes and tongue; but now she crouched back in the dark corner and could hardly keep away her tears. ‘Better I than Lyneth—don’t you agree?’ And she was back to that first hour of her arrival, the little heart-weary, sparrow-governess, in her neat brown skirt and jacket with the bold touch of black in the trimming of her bonnet, that even the intimidating Madame Devalle had admitted to having some chic: standing before the great front door, swearing to herself that this gloomy old house should not hold her for long... And the small darting figure appearing from behind the pillar of the portico, clasping her about the waist so that the hooped skirt swung out behind her: Lyneth with her golden hair and limpid blue eyes, making her winsome way into the sorrowful heart. True, Christine had followed, but it had been Lyn who had come first and who in the other sense, from that day on had always come first. I am guilty, said the stricken woman to herself: I am guilty. And now—‘Better that I should suffer, than that Lyneth should?’ She said, fighting for release from her own sick self-knowledge, ‘How can you give yourself over to them, Christine, as you call it? All they want is the bride and for her to marry and continue the next generation...’

‘Lyn may do that,’ said Christine. ‘Calling herself by my

name. She can escape to Plas Dar and there be safe from them. And I must ask them to release me from my brideship—believing me to be Lyneth: and offer myself to Richard—who loves me—as his bride.’ She hurried over it, skated over the words. ‘So there need be no break in the continuity of their hauntings; or so they will suppose until I die and they must go back to their Other World and discover—too late to do us any more harm—how they’ve been tricked.’

Her step-mother was not listening to her. ‘Offer yourself as a bride to that—that dead thing, that ghost? How can a ghost have a—have a bride?’

‘God knows,’ said Christine. ‘That I have yet to find out.’

That day, when first she had arrived, when these two young creatures whom in all the world alone she loved—how strangely he had looked at her, Hil, with that look of fear in his bright blue glance. And, ‘One day you will destroy us all,’ he had said to her; and that day was come. It was seldom now that she gave a thought to the great scar that ran down one side of her face. Now she put up her hand to it. She thought: It’s as if it ran down across my soul. Aloud she said: ‘You make me feel, Christine, as though this great scar of mine disfigured not only my face but my soul as well.’

‘Oh, Tetty—!’ She moved across the smooth black leather of the upholstery and put her arms about her step-mother, kissing the scarred cheek, laying her silky head against the shaking shoulder. ‘Forgive me, darling! I don’t mean the harsh things that I say. I’m frightened and sometimes my heart seems to be breaking and I sink with terror at the thought of what must be done. But it must be done: and to force you to help me, I use what weapons I must, cruel though they may be.’

‘And yet you’re right in what you say. You ask me to choose between yourself and Lyn—’

‘It’s for myself as well—God knows what their vengeance might be! For myself as well as for Lyn; and for Lawrence. Just—play my terrible game with me, Tetty, and all my words are unsaid: just help me through!’

Now, without prompting, her ladyship, taking only Lyneth with her, went up to the house on the hill. ‘I come again to ask your advice.’ She said stiffly, ‘I think that you resent the fact that upon the last occasion I was here, I gave a sort of promise, and seem not to have lived up to it. Christine has explained to you—’

‘—that she blackmailed you into acquiescence. By what means—?’

‘If you were to know that, she would have no hold over me! She saw her mistake and said, looking frightened, ‘I mean only that if everyone were to know—’

His face grew dark. ‘A secret? From *me*? About Menna’s child?’ And he swore as he seldom did. ‘Sweet Jesus—!’

Lyneth stood un-listening by the lattice window. ‘What is it, Tetty, what’s happening? You do things behind my back, all of you. All the plot about our deceiving the ghosts... And now there’s to be more to it?’

Hil steadied himself, went over to her, brought her back to the centre of the room where once again Lady Hilbourne sat stiff-backed in the tall wooden chair, hands gripped together, trembling, the great scar gleaming blue-white against the ivory white of her blanched skin. She said: ‘I couldn’t be alone, Lyn, telling you this. Christine has given herself over to him—to the ghost, Richard. She has promised to belong to him entirely. In your name, Lyneth, she has promised to give up the marriage with Lawrence.

She—’ She broke off, tears filled her eyes, she held out her hand. ‘Come to me, Lyn, please, and put your hand into mine. To help me to explain to you.’ And clinging tightly to the small hand, she told her. ‘They are never to know of the substitution. She is to remain “Lyneth” forever. She—she calls herself his bride.’

‘It is an abomination,’ said Hil as he had said before, to Christine.

‘It is done,’ said Lady Hilbourne. ‘She has spoken to him, she has made it impossible to retreat from it. And for the rest—who knows about the exchange? You know, Lyneth, and I know and Hil knows. Nobody else. Everyone else believes already that you are Christine; and as Christine you are to remain for the rest of your life.’

What in its simpler form had seemed such an enormity, dwindled before the single purpose now almost always uppermost in that self-centred little heart. ‘But, Tetty—it’s not Christine that Lawrence is going to marry.’

Hil stood watching them: would not speak, would contribute nothing. An abomination! Tetty said: ‘It was Christine whom Lawrence first loved.’

‘You mean he’d turn back to me—believing me to be Christine?’

‘He would never do that,’ said Hil with a sort of faint rising of hope, though what in God’s name he might hope for, he hardly knew. ‘His heart is like hers—once given, given for ever. He will always love Lyneth.’

‘Well, but, Hil—he wouldn’t have to change. After all, I am Lyneth.’

He paced away across the room, came back. ‘It’s of an extraordinary subtlety. Lawrence is in love with Lyneth. Why should he cease to love her because she wears another name?’

‘He would think he was being disloyal?’ suggested Lyneth, doubtfully.

‘And yet...’ said Tetty, ‘remember that all his life, till a few months ago, he loved Christine. But to let him suppose himself falling in love with her again—I think we dare not risk it.’

‘You dare not *do it*!’ said Hil. ‘It would be monstrous. To confuse him, to play about with his love and his loyalties—no one has a right to do such a thing to a man.’ He decided: ‘If it has to be done, God help you all!—then he must be told.’

‘Well—I had thought of that,’ said Lady Hilbourne. ‘But heaven knows how it could ever be explained to him? We have learned to accept the situation, the curse upon the house, the hauntings... But Lawrence—?’

Back to what really mattered. ‘You mean I’m to go on always pretending to be Christine and Lawrence would have to pretend to jilt me and go back to Christine?’

‘You must be the one to do any jilting, Lyn. After all, you are supposed to be in fact where Christine is—shut up most of your time in the west wing, communing with people that no one else can see or hear. Nobody has forgotten the dinner-party or your odd behaviour there, or your objections to going to live at Plas Dar. Lawrence has been abroad quite a long time now. By the time he returns, you are widely known to have become more and more a recluse—your sister will see to that—and so to have turned away from the marriage. It will be perfectly natural if he appears to mend his broken heart with his first love. There’ll be no disloyalty, the supposed Lyneth will agree, will encourage it. She’s become ill as her mother was before her. In due course, as “Christine”, you will marry him and simply move into your life with him.’

‘So continuing the line for further tragedies,’ said Hil.

‘You’ve admitted yourself, Hil, that these girls could not have been locked away all their lives from society, prevented from a natural way of life.’

‘Besides,’ suggested Lyn shrewdly, ‘when our line through all this self-sacrifice had died out—our cousin Arthur or his heirs would simply move in and start it all over again. The curse is upon the brides of Aberdar.’ She asked: ‘Has it affected all girls married from this house? The younger sisters and so on?’

They thought back through their researches, made so long ago. ‘I think,’ said Tetty, ‘it was to the heiress that the worst came, or to the girl who married the heir. They couldn’t haunt more than one girl at a time?—or they’d have haunted Christine as well as Lyneth. I think just—no bride was happy here, but that’s as far as it went.’

‘So if they’re haunting Christine now—’

‘—you are safe from them. And when you marry you can leave Aberdar altogether—’

‘You needn’t think I’m going to spend my life in that horrid Plas Dar. The old woman doesn’t want me there—’

‘She will if she believes that you are Christine,’ said Tetty.

‘Well, anyway, I’m not going there. If the ghosts are satisfied with haunting Christine, then Lawrence and I can safely live at Aberdar.’

‘Very well then,’ began Tetty easily, but Hil interrupted her. ‘You are not living at Aberdar, Lyneth: not you and Lawrence! I beg your ladyship’s pardon, but she shall not bring him here to live under her sister’s nose and break her heart even further: day after day, a witness to their happiness. Dear God!—has she not given enough, hasn’t she sacrificed enough?’ In a mounting rage, he turned upon

them both. 'You are a monster of selfishness, Lyneth, I loved you so much but I tell you now that you are a pitiless monster. And not the only one: for she was the one, her precious ladyship here, she was the one, who taught you to be so. I have gone all this way with these ghastly plans of yours, because Christine, in her selflessness, forced me to agree. But I'll go no further. Before ever Lawrence moves into Aberdar Manor, a happy thriving bridegroom at all this bitter, bitter cost to Christine—I shall take steps to prevent it. I shall come to the house and where the ghosts can overhear me, I shall speak out everything I know; and God help you all then!'

The old bitter anger flared up in remonstrance, the broken pride. 'Don't you dare to defy me, Hil! Don't you dare to enter my house, I shall not permit it...!'

'Very well, then,' he said, 'I won't enter it. I will stand outside, instead, and declare to the world the truth of that "mistake" of yours, my lady—that sweet, pretty, fragrant idea dreamed up in your ladylike mind, your pretty idea of a revenge: revenge upon guilty—if you will—and innocent alike.' He stood over her, his fist clenched as though to restrain himself from lifting it against her. 'Go now! This house at least is mine and I wish for you to be in it, no more than you want me in yours. Go—and take your apt pupil with you! But when your decision is made, send me word of it, because till I know that she and Lawrence shall live—where I care not, but not at Aberdar—then this double threat hangs over you. I will have Christine no further betrayed.' Lyneth cried out to him, but only to bring upon herself the storm of his bitter rage, bursting its bounds at last. 'Don't speak to me, Lyneth, I want no more of you. Get up, go, go with her!—you were sweet once, as she was herself: but she turned away from that in the savagery of

her pride, and she has made you what you are. You are two of a kind. But let either of you make one move that will cause Christine an iota more of pain than already she's taken on herself for your sake—for your sake, selfish, unfeeling, ungrateful little beast that you are...!' He broke off. He said wearily to Tetty: 'Why do I rail at the wretched girl? It is all your fault.'

She stood before him, almost physically reeling under the hail of words. She said: 'Long ago, you told me that you could see into the future; you told me that one day I should destroy you all.'

'I still see into the future,' he said. 'And you have not done with us yet.'

CHAPTER 20

HER LADYSHIP ORDERED OUT the carriage and drove over, unaccompanied to Plas Dar. Lady Jones received her cagily but the purpose of the visit seemed after all to be only a civil offer to act as courier, in carrying messages—gift packages, perhaps, to her absent son? ‘I am taking my girls to spend Christmas abroad. They have neither of them seemed recently in the best of health.’

‘No, indeed,’ said Lady Jones a little too eagerly. ‘I have heard that dear Lyneth—’

‘—and I think that a spell of sunshine would do them both good.’

And do *you* no harm, thought Lady Jones, eyeing her guest curiously. You’re grim enough in the ordinary way, and sallow as—as... What could one think of that was sallow? Like a dried root of ginger, Sir Thomas used to say. ‘I always think of her as a root of dried ginger dressed up in an ugly brown frock.’ But now positively she was a death’s head, so grim and grey. ‘And I hope you also will benefit: you do not look well.’

‘We can all do with a change, I daresay. Aberdar is a cold house in the winter, situated so low. I had thought of Rapallo, on the Italian coast...’

‘I fear that you will not find dear Lawrence at Rapallo,’ said his mama, a trifle loftily. ‘Lawrence is spending his Christmas doing the sights of Rome.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Lady Hilbourne, sweetly. ‘If a certain young lady is spending *her* Christmas in Rapallo?’

For it had been decided that the final transition should be made away from home. Lawrence must be given time to

absorb the shock of the curious revelations that would have to be made to him—not a word about the anathema, just vague explanations which his guileless heart would accept without too much questioning, considering the source—the three trusted sources—from which they came.

Lady Hilbourne would hint at symptoms in Christine of that strange malady which had afflicted her mother... This odd whim that she should change places with her sister, adopt her name... An over-anxiety, perhaps, on their part, to deny her nothing; and after all, what need it matter to anyone outside their four selves, if Christine became Lyneth and Lyneth called herself Christine? Everyone was aware of that old boy-and-girl love affair: it would be easily accepted that under the circumstances, he had turned back to where his heart had always belonged... And Christine herself would suggest to him in the listless way nowadays only too real in her, that it would help her if he would accept this absurd, this irrational notion of hers; she was ill, at the mercy of these inexplicable impulses—but he must forgive her and would never, ever reveal to anyone what between the four of them, they had agreed?

And Lyneth would be sweet and cajoling as only she could be: anything to comfort their poor, darling ailing Christine and anyway how splendidly such an exchange would suit herself, Lyneth, and him! His mother had always cared most for Christine, had been distressed for her, when he had altered his allegiance; as Christine, she would bring to their marriage no back-log of rebellious impertinence; and if he would agree to play their game, to indulge poor Christine in her fantasies and keep it all a secret now and forever—she on her part would undertake to accept the broom-cupboard and the re-conditioned gun-room, and make herself happy and acceptable in their life together at

Plas Dar...

Word would be allowed to trickle back home that, under the influence of the sunny skies of Italy, the old romance had blossomed again, the temporary infatuation was dead. But, alas! poor dear little Lyneth seemed not well at all—growing ever more difficult and odd, her ladyship would confide to Tante Louise, knowing that the sad tidings would soon emerge in bursts of volubility. In hopes of improvement, they were extending their sojourn abroad for another week or two...

Lawrence, ever sweet and simple, was putty in their hands.

And yet another week or two. It was February before, late in the evening, tired-out after the long journey, Christine went up, pale and drawn, to the room that had once been Lyneth's—and found him awaiting her there. Richard alone: Lenora was not with him. He said coldly: 'You promised us that if we agreed to your going, you would not stay long away.'

'I couldn't come. It was not in my power.' She took off her cloak wearily and threw it across a chair. 'But I am here now. And what I undertook to promote before you would let me go—is done. It is arranged that my sister—that Christine—shall be married early in the spring.'

He said eagerly: 'To the clodhopper?'

'To Lawrence. He has transferred his affections back to his childhood love. They will live at Plas Dar. He is out of my life.'

His arms, like a chill fog, wreathing about her. 'And you are mine? You are my love for ever? You are my bride?'

She threw out her hand as though in the last terrible moments to clutch at reality, at sanity—at life. But Death had his arms about her. Oh, my little sister, she thought, oh,

Lawrence—my two only loves, both false to me and yet I must do this for *you*! And reality and sanity and life itself were slipping from her failing grasp...‘You are my love for ever? You are my bride?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘For ever. Your bride.’ And she descended into hell and knew that hell need not be the fire and brimstone of her childhood upbringing, but as cold as death. For all through that night, she lay in the arms of the dead.

CHAPTER 21

AND THE SPRING CAME and another spring and another; and at Plas Dar, 'Christine' lived as the pretty little, charming little wife, burgeoning into motherhood, the admiration of all—not quite so sweet and gentle, perhaps, as in former times, but she seemed to have inherited from her sister, Lyneth, some of those old witching ways. Lyneth, the poor dotty sister, meanwhile, a byword in and around the wide manor lands of Aberdar—for in these days of easier communication, such secrets were harder to keep than they had been twenty, forty, sixty years back, as succeeding brides fell victim to the strange family malady. She kept very much to her rooms now, which once had formed the nursery suite: a Lady of Shalott who 'having no loyal knight and true' would yet stand sometimes at her window to look down to where he rode, coming across the little bridge to visit her. False lover but true friend: to her sad eyes so brave, so beautiful, so shining still—Sir Lancelot.

For the rest—no company but her ghosts. Now and again she would take a drive with Lady Hilbourne, but, 'What is the use, Tetty? We can never speak freely in the house, they are watching and listening all the time. Solemnly order the carriage and go wandering about the countryside so that we may talk together—but what have we left to say? News of the neighbourhood, of the house and the estates—what interest is any of it to me nowadays? I shan't live long enough to know how it all develops. Or at least, I hope I shan't!—but they've all died young, the brides of Aberdar. And I could tell you why.'

'Oh, my dear, darling child—are you so unhappy?'

‘The other dear, darling child you care about is at Plas Dar, Tetty, and she at any rate is happy. At least, I hope she is? Is she truly so?’

‘My dear, why do you ask these painful questions? Yes, of course, she is, why shouldn’t she be? In her situation, all her days must be filled with happiness.’

‘I have a right to ask, after all. I pay for every hour of it.’

‘You insisted upon this course, Christine. We had no power to prevent you. Must you now spoil all your great goodness, by this over-riding bitterness?’

‘But you did have the power to prevent it, Tetty: never to have let any of it happen. *She* could have found happiness anywhere; but no, she had to steal mine, and you had the keys of the safe and you handed them over. Do you call me bitter because from my prison upstairs, I must watch her in possession of the treasures that you should have guarded from her vanity and greed? I am very naked without them; shivering with cold, my heart is like ice. And if one touches ice, Tetty, one will feel the cold too. We had better drive back.’

‘Do you think *my* heart is not like ice?’ said Tetty, and lifted a hand to knock a signal to the coachman to turn for home.

And Hil tried a little experiment, booking a table for luncheon in the old Lion Hotel in Shrewsbury, a short train journey away: Mr Dickens himself had stayed there and written about the place—what if they were actually to see him!—what if he were staying there now?

Christine was very thin nowadays, her face always haggard and pale; a travesty of the lovely young creature of only three years ago, with her bright eyes and the sheen on

her yellow hair. He was almost afraid to subject her to the day's excitement but she kept up with him gallantly, breasting the hill up from the station and down again—'The wonderful street names, Hil—Wyle Pole and Dog Cop! And all the old houses, as old or older than Aberdar.' And it was so wonderful to be able to walk unrecognised—'Nobody to pity the poor harmless lunatic or scuttle off out of my dangerous way!'

'My poor darling, dearest—what can I say? If you could only get away, leave the place, go where they couldn't follow you—'

'The house wouldn't let me go, Hil, you know that. It's been tried too often. And—well, I mustn't distress you, it's not all horror, darling, day after day. One gets used to it, as one gets used to almost anything. Richard in his own strange way loves me...' She concealed the shudder that ran like cold water through her veins at the memory of such manifestations of that love as she could not speak aloud. 'And for his sake, Lenora is fond of me, they try to keep me happy with them; and their conversation, heaven knows, is more entertaining than that of anyone left in the world who would trouble to converse with me now...'

'What can they have to talk about?'

'Well... Three people cooped up in a choice of two or three narrow rooms! Twice a day, I used to go down and sit at the dining-room table with Tetty: but even that I've given up. We both knew that every word we spoke was listened to, it was all so strained and I was hardly a stimulating conversationalist, I daresay—what do I know of present-day affairs? All the politics I hear is of Mr William Cecil and his machinations and the plots of poor Mary of Scotland and was it right or not that she should die? I keep forgetting myself among everyday people and coming out with some

remark about the complications with Spain—no wonder they think I'm out of my mind!

But her spirits revived as they reached the inn, moved through the beautiful old ballroom, designed by the brothers Adam ('It puts Plas Dar and poor dear Sir John Soane in their place!') and into the dining room. She said as they settled at their table, 'I mustn't be too much filled with self-pity, Hil. After all, it doesn't happen to everyone to live in total familiarity with the days when this very hostelry was building! So fascinating to hear casual reference to events in history that one hardly realised really and truly took place. To them, Henry VIII was a gross old man who would have tumbled Lenora into bed if he'd ever set eyes on her; they talk of people going to the block as we talk of dismissing an unsatisfactory servant. And of course Lenora knows every tuck and placket of the clothes they wore; she says all those jewels were very rough and ill-cut beside what has been seen since in the modern world.'

He was filled with anguish by the transparency of the brave effort. 'You have your piano, Christine? And do you still dabble at your painting?'

Ah, well, as to that, no. All our earnest training in the arts has been wasted on me. Lyneth, I daresay, rattles away at Plas Dar to the admiration of all, but what do my ghosts know of Mozart and Haydn?—to them all music is compounded in the scrapings and pipings of fiddles and lutes for Her Majesty to dance to. I must say, she does grow a little wearisome: every other word is 'the queen'—and a grotesque enough creature she must have been by then with her rotting teeth and the pock-marks covered over with thick white paint. And as for art—you'd think no one but Master Holbein had ever laid brush to canvas...'

The room was huge and sombrely magnificent and the

table shone with starched napery and bright silver and glass. Wine was poured. 'Do you realise, Hil, that that waiter is almost the only stranger I've spoken to, literally for years?' Her eyes filled with tears. 'Oh, Hil, I'm sorry, I'm sorry to seem to harp on about my troubles all the time—but cooped up there all my life, darling, all my life, in three small rooms with no company but the dead—people who are dead, Hil, people who are *dead*...!'

He leaned his forehead on his hand to hide his own tears. 'What can I say to you, what in God's name can one say?'

'Oh, well... There's always my Hil, my ever-loving, my ever-kind! But, when you think of it, no one else, really. Tante Louise regards me in her practical way as simply a poor madwoman and talks to me as though I were five years old, and as for Tetty, I seem not to be able to keep myself from reproaches; besides, all her heart is at Plas Dar, these days, with Lyneth and the baby Christina.'

'Lawrence comes to you sometimes?'

'Oh, yes, and we walk on the terrace when it's not too cold, out of hearing—though, of course, he doesn't realise it—of my Familiars. Each time I promise myself an hour in heaven, but in the end he just talks about the property and is innocently surprised to find the poor lunatic betraying so intelligent an interest. Of course he's wretchedly conscious, my honest Lawrence, that in fact it's really all mine.'

The situation was a strange one now since, in passing over her identity to her sister, Christine had also passed over her inheritance. 'Not that I mind, Hil, you know that; I never have. Let her have it, she has everything else that I care about. I sometimes wonder that she doesn't insist upon moving in her Manor—why put up with a wing in her father-in-law's house when she is heiress to all our great

estate?’

The fact was that Lyneth did not move into Aberdar Manor because she feared to come again under the domination of the ghosts, but Hil only said mildly: ‘She wouldn’t want to disturb you, Christine. Of course she regards it as your home.’

‘How untypically accommodating of her,’ said her sister, ironically, ‘since in fact it is mine.’ She shrugged wearily. ‘Ah, well—it will all be hers in reality when I am dead. And that won’t be long now. You have only to look at me. The very image, they’re murmuring behind my back, of my poor mother in those last days when anybody still saw her outside her room. And, once again, Lyneth wins. I was never a bride and so, though they don’t yet know it, my ghosts have broken the conditions of the anathema. They’ll go back to their Other World, and this time with no thread tying them still to this one. Lyn won’t be haunted, her children won’t be haunted—the curse won’t operate any more.’ She gave a small, grim smile. ‘Unless I decide to take over and haunt Lyn in my turn.’

‘Oh, Christine—’

‘Don’t be too troubled about me, Hil,’ she said. ‘I ought not to rest all my burdens on your sad shoulders. You grieve because darling Menna is dead—?’

‘That was all so long past,’ he said. ‘It’s a quiet sorrow. I torment myself with the thought that it stems from my abandonment: but in fact the physical causes were clear and it seems she died happy and in no pain.’

‘I envy her with all my heart,’ said Christine. ‘But for me too it will be soon over; and I shall be grateful to die. They say there’s this—Light. There can be nothing to prevent *me*, at least, from making the journey towards it, where everything will be bathed in something I haven’t

known for a very longtime—where there will be hope.’

‘And your ghosts—?’

‘—what will become of them? A return to the grey mists and veils of their Other World, I suppose, with no relief now of promised return, no spying down meanwhile on the lives of the victims of their vengeance, of the victims to come. And so Lyn’s children will be free; but also, I suppose, all the generations to come. In which case, after all, I shan’t have suffered and died in vain.’ She rose and began to gather together her possessions, ready to depart. ‘So at least, darling Hil, and with all my thanks—we end on a happier note...’ And again she insisted, it had been a simply lovely day.

A lovely day. But the day would end and the night would come; and all night long she would lie, passionless, in the arms of the passionate dead.

CHAPTER 22

AND ANOTHER SPRING PASSED and another. Tante Louise, with one of the girls living across the river at Plas Dar and once-beloved Lyneth mopping and mowing in the west wing, found that she could no longer endure the gloomy old house, in the loveless company of her ladyship alone, and announced that her rheumatism and other ills made it imperative to return to Bruxelles and spend her last years where her origins had been. 'Very well,' said Lady Hilbourne to the devoted slave of some fifteen years' endurance, 'when do you wish to leave?'

From his remotion in the little house up above the Manor, Hil imposed a properly sufficient annuity—'I take leave to remind your ladyship that Madame Devalle furnished several of the rooms at Aberdar with her own quite valuable possessions. Unless she is to remove them, she should be recompensed for these; and beyond that, Sir Edward gave certain undertakings...'

'I find no written evidence,' said her ladyship, replying in the customary stiff note, 'of any undertakings.'

'They were made in my presence,' wrote Hil in answer. 'But if your ladyship objects, I will have a word with Christine, who—whatever else Lyneth has usurped—in hard fact is still his heir.' To Christine, he suggested: 'You owe her a lot, my dear?'

'Do you think so, Hil?' said Christine in her sad voice. 'She was hardly my best friend where Lyneth's claims were concerned.' But she added: 'Whatever you thought it correct to give her—please double the amount at my expense.'

Summer came and though the tiny girl at Plas Dar was

now three years old, there seemed, to the chagrin of Sir Thomas and Lady Jones, no promise of any further family. Lawrence, under parental hints not very subtly conveyed, shrugged his shoulders and said tightly that there was plenty of time. He was not nowadays, poor Lawrence, the easy-going, laughing young man that once he had been. That little wife of his, said the neighbourhood, gossiping: it was odd how much she had changed! Miss Christine had seemed of the Hilbourne twins to be always the sweeter and more gentle, but she was proving as self-centred a little huzzy as ever her sister had been. A pity the boy had ever left Lyneth and gone back to his first love; but then, on the other hand, poor Lyneth—quite mad these days, one had heard, mopping and mowing up in that attic of hers! It was a strange family. Her poor mother, Anne Hilbourne, she'd been just the same...

The child had been christened Christina—after her own mother, said the gossips, how typical! But Lyneth was paying this one grateful tribute at least, to that great sacrifice which daily, nightly, was offered—literally—in her name.

And now... In the long-ago days, it had been Christine and Lawrence Jones, Lyneth and her cousin Arthur; and Arthur, broken hearted at Lyneth's defection, had gone off to foreign parts—not in fact to hunt big game as she had then flippantly suggested, but to develop a devotion to travel abroad and, with intervals, to pursue it over three or four restless years. But now Arthur was at home and thought it innocent enough to call upon his old friend, Lawrence, at Plas Dar; the more so that, after all, it was Christine who was Lawrence's wife. His own past love, Lyneth, he heard with sorrow, was now stricken with the family malady, living at Aberdar and almost totally a

recluse.

So Arthur came to Plas Dar—and within the hour the old magic was at work. Unaware that this was in fact his first true love, he found himself trapped in the fatal fascination of the supposed Christine and knew that he must flee from disaster as fast as he could go. But how escape when danger wore so smiling a face and held out to him welcoming hands? He felt himself drowning in honey and in all too short a little while, forgot all but that the honey was sweet.

For—it had been true perhaps when the ghosts had said that Lawrence Jones was a dull young man. If to be sweet tempered, easy-going and doggedly devoted was to be dull, then Lawrence was dull. And life at Plas Dar was dull, with the parental eye always upon her. Scarcely out of her teens, already tied down by marriage and motherhood, predictably an illogical resentment had taken root within her. And now...‘Well, Tetty, it’s your fault, you should never have let me marry him.’

The summer had come and Lady Hilbourne sat out on a bench on the lower terrace, looking across the little river to the hillside in all its leafy green. Over forty now and very much the matron, she wore always a tiny crown of the handmade lace that Tante Louise brought back from her native Brussels, with two streamers of pale brown velvet hanging down at the back, to match the inevitable dress of plain russet or sepia, tight and tailored in the bodice, flowing out into a rigid crinoline.

Lyneth, however, was very smart and bright these days, very much in the current fashion of hitched-up skirt over a scarlet petticoat, worn short to expose the charming little tasselled boots with their painted heels. She had driven over in the dogcart with the little Christina—carried into the

house by Tomos to visit her aunt in the upstairs rooms; the young gentlemen were at this moment to be seen, riding down the path that led to the little bridge across the river, coming from Plas Dar. 'Not a word in front of *them*, Tetty, about all this!'

'Lyneth, I cannot believe that you're serious. Leave Lawrence—!'

'I should never have married him.'

'We tried to dissuade you, but you would have him.'

'Only because I didn't want *her* to have him. I was just a spoilt child—if only you'd been a little more clever with me, I might still have been free, now, today—I'm not yet twenty-three—with a whole glittering world to choose from and maturity enough to choose a lot more wisely. Well, now it's going to end, and if you don't like it, look inward, Tetty, and see whose fault that is.'

Even she, thought her step-mother, stiff and erect as ever on the old stone garden seat, even she who all her life has been my pet and my darling, now turns against me. She said grimly: 'Don't try to absolve yourself of blame, Lyneth, by forcing it all back to me. You were greedy and jealous and in your egotism you have brought your wonderful sister to what she is now—'

'She would have come to that anyway. She'd have married Lawrence and, being a bride, she would have been haunted. It's only that she's come to it at second hand.'

'But *you* were to be the bride—you cheated her out of her lover and became the bride-to-be and so you inherited the hauntings. To save you, she took the curse upon herself—she did it all for you.'

'She did it all for Lawrence, really, Tetty. But what has that to do with it now. Arthur and I are in love, as we always were. I'm going away with him.'

Now the stern figure did a little crumple. 'Lyn, you don't really mean it? You can't do it! What will become of you?'

'I shall be with Arthur. Lawrence must divorce me—'

'Lawrence will never divorce you, he would never do such a thing.'

'Well, then, we must live abroad. Arthur knows all the delightful places—'

'There are no delightful places, as you'll find out, for a woman who has left her husband and child.'

'Who says I shall leave my child?'

'Take her with you! A married woman, roaming the continent with your paramour, trying to find such acquaintance as you could bear to know, who would condescend to know *you*! You couldn't be so cruel and so wicked!'

'If I'm cruel and wicked, Tetty,' said Lyneth, 'it was you who made me so. Deep down inside you, you're cruel and wicked yourself. If I robbed my sister of her true love, well, you aided and abetted me in that. If I condemned her to take my place in the life she leads now—you abetted me in that also. It was you who taught me to believe that whatever I wanted, that I must have. Well, I want to go away with Arthur. Whether or not I can bring myself to leave Christina, I'm not sure. I know it's awful, I know I'm dreadful, Tetty, but I love him. I'm going away with Arthur, I'm leaving Lawrence...'

Christine nowadays made little secret of her curious way of life. 'I have taken on a burden which is not mine,' her attitude seemed to say. 'If others wish to conceal it, so they may. Why need *I* be ashamed of it?' She was confined very much to her own rooms, however, up in the old nursery wing, only Tomos in faithful attendance and the

oldest and most trusted of the housemaids. But it was impossible to keep her caged like a dangerous lunatic, in a house that was in fact all her own; and she would make her way downstairs occasionally, the servants peering out from behind curtains or half-closed doors to watch her in easy converse with a company unheard and unseen as she passed through the great hall on her way out to the gardens, or roamed without purpose through the once familiar rooms. Tomos, ever watchful to protect her from intrusion, came across her in the dining-room, holding little Christina by the hand. 'It was in here, Tina, that the funny gentleman made the lady sit down in his lap, and your naughty aunt went off into lots and lots of giggling...!' So entirely nowadays had she adopted her sister's mantle that she almost forgot that it had been not she, but the real Lyneth, who had behaved so deplorably that evening. 'You remember, Tomos?'

'I don't remember any lady sitting in a gentleman's lap, Miss Lyn. I do remember that I tipped the soup into yours.'

'Yes, yes, Christina—naughty Tomos, all the soup in my lap! And I didn't even have my bib on, did I, Tomos?'

The tiny girl fell to an extremity of giggling. 'How delicious she is!' said Richard, appearing in the doorway, watching them. 'A miniature replica of you.'

'After all, her mother is a replica of me.'

'Nobody dere?' said the little girl, scared and bewildered, staring towards the door, where her aunt stood smiling, gesturing, exchanging her pleasantries with—no one.

Tomos looked anxious. 'Why don't you take her out into the sunshine, Miss Lyn? Her ladyship and Miss Christine are sitting on the lower terrace.' He preceded them into the hall and caught up a large Paisley shawl. 'Let me put this round you, Miss; you're so thin, these days, you

feel the cold more than most.' With the loving familiarity of long years of service, he came round and taking one thin hand, so placed it at her bosom, as to keep the shawl secure. 'Now, Miss Christina, you take your Aunt Lyneth out for a nice walk.' Over the years, he had become aware that only within the house did his young mistress persist in her strange behaviour; outside it, she seemed free of the illusions that appeared to govern all her waking life.

Arthur Hilbourne, just dismounted, stood with his friend in the open doorway. Dear God!—is this my Lyneth?

'Now you know why we weren't in any hurry to bring you over to call on her.'

'But she's so thin! And so pale! But who is she—?'

'Well, she talks to—we don't understand,' said Lawrence, hopelessly. 'You knew she'd been ill.'

'Yes, but... Oh, Tomos,' he said, whispering to the manservant, well-remembered friend of his childhood days, 'how thin and pale your young lady has grown!'

'Take her out into the sunshine, Mr Arthur,' said Tomos, urgently, whispering back. God forbid that the young gentleman should see her when one of them—attacks—came on! 'Mr Lawrence, take her into the garden.'

But already she had moved over to where Richard stood with Lenora, leaning in a familiar pose of elegant negligence on the newel post at the foot of the broad stair. 'But, Lyn, I shall be sad if you go out; don't go!'

'And if you make Diccon sad, Lyneth, I shall be cross. And you don't like that, do you?'

'Well,' she said, uncertainly, 'if you really object—'

Christina, however, had caught sight of her father and his friend, standing as though rooted to the spot, in the entrance doorway. 'Papa! Cousin Arfur! Aunt Lyn, look!'—and Christine turned and saw them. 'Oh, Lawrence...! And

—Arthur, can it really be you? I heard that you were staying at Plas Dar—'

'I've brought him over to visit you,' said Lawrence, stepping into the breach of Arthur's speechless distress.

'... should have come sooner,' mumbled Arthur.

'Well, but it's wonderful to see you now!'

'And wonderful to see you, dear, sweet Lyn,' he said, pulling himself together, coming forward to take her hand.

'Wonderful, wonderful!' mimicked Richard from the stairway, and Lenora said disparagingly: 'Is this the famous first love?'

She ignored the outstretched hand, turned back to them. In fact he had never been her first love; Lawrence had been her first and only—ever love. But she was Lyneth, whose first love indeed their cousin, Arthur Hilbourne, had been. 'That's long over,' she said to the ghosts, earnestly.

'Nobody dere?' said the child again, clinging tight to her father's hand.

Not for other eyes to see; but there they were indeed, so beautiful, and bright, Lenora dark and brilliant, Diccon with his aureole of the golden Hilbourne hair. 'There's no need to be jealous,' she was saying to him, pleadingly. 'He was my first love but we were only children. Then I turned to Lawrence Jones because—because my sister loved him and wanted him; and I would have been his bride except that you and Lenora wanted *me* and so I gave him up to Christine—'

'And yourself to Diccon for ever!'

She stood trembling. 'Yes, Lenora. Yes, Diccon, I did: I gave myself over to you for ever.'

Arthur stood in the doorway, ashen and trembling. 'Dear God, Lawrence, dear God!—what is happening?' There at the foot of the broad stairs, smiling, pleading, responding

to voices unheard, her own voice only half heard across the wide hall—gesturing, gesticulating; ludicrous, grotesque, infinitely pathetic...‘Who is she talking to? What is this all about? Is she mad?’

‘It’s what I tried to prepare you for,’ said Lawrence, almost as shaken as he. ‘It’s this—this Hilbourne sickness; they say that her mother was the same.’ He added quickly: ‘You’ve no need to be afraid—it seems to be inherited only by this branch of the family: your own would be free of it.’

‘Aren’t you anxious about the child?’

‘Her mother seems free enough of any taint of it. I can but pray, as indeed I do every night on my knees—that my beautiful Christine is safe and her precious Christina.’

Arthur’s heart turned over, sick within him at recollection of the treachery contemplated against his ever well-loved friend; and felt in himself the same cold shiver of apprehension as had come to his beloved—could he but have known it—on the night of her betrothal to another man: when first the bright ghost had appeared before her and her betrothal ring fallen into the water of the little fountain—when she had known the touch of that hand that was like a drift of mist in her own, chill and intangible... He came-to with a start and found that the sick girl had left the stairway—had indeed taken his hand in a hand as cold as ice and was leading them across the broad gravelled drive and on to the terrace. Below them, her sister sat in close conversation with their step-mother. Lawrence said, ‘We’ll go down and join them...’

But he could not endure to go there, not yet: to be with these two old and dear friends, exchange sly glances with the girl he was planning to steal from them: to posture and pretend. ‘Could we walk a little, before we meet Lady Hilbourne?’

‘We’ll go round by the stables,’ said Lawrence immediately, glancing at the white face and trying to speak lightly. ‘There’s a new pair of carriage horses just arrived: Hil will be there receiving them. Just wait while I conduct Lyneth down the terrace steps...’

‘We’ll go veeeeery quietly,’ said Christina to her aunt as he left them on the grassy pathway leading between the flowerbeds to the bench. ‘Give Mama a *biiiiit*g deprise!’ She caught at Christine’s hand and led her, tip-toeing, to where the two sat, backs turned to them, lost in the intensity of their conversation.

And Lyneth’s voice said, just raised in defiance: ‘I *am* leaving Lawrence, Tetty. I *am* going away with Arthur.’

She cried out in an absolute agony, ‘Lyneth!’ and two white and startled faces were turned as she stumbled towards them. The little girl ran after her, clutching at her skirts. She cried: ‘Tetty—take her! Take her away, take her into the house!’ But her eyes were fixed on her sister’s face. ‘What did you say? Lyn? You *can’t* have said that? What did you say—?’

Their step-mother scooped up the protesting child and was gone, pausing only to look back from the upper terrace to where they confronted one another, Lyneth ashen-faced, at bay. ‘I can’t help it, Christine. I’ve fallen in love with Arthur.’

For this! All the huge out-pouring of sacrifice, to end in this! She stammered: ‘But Lyneth—you’re married to Lawrence.’

‘Darling... Christine, please understand, please understand! I can’t help it. One can’t help one’s feelings. I’ve fallen out of love with him, that’s all.’

Christine stood ashen, gasping, clutching the bosom of her white dress; the Paisley shawl tumbled back from her

shoulders to the ground. 'Out of love! You can't be! You can't have fallen out of love with him. He's your husband, you married him.'

Lyneth's face was terribly pale under the bright little, hard, high hat with its cocky red feather. 'I married him because you wanted him Christine. Didn't I? We both knew that. It's terrible, I know: but it's true. I don't think I ever loved him at all, not really.'

'But you taught him to love *you*. And he does, he married you and he loves you, he'll never change. You can't leave him, Lyn, you can't! You must get over this and go back to loving him, Arthur must go away—'

'Arthur loves me too.'

'It's not Arthur you're married to. You gave your promise to Lawrence. And Lyn, you're not going to break your promise to Lawrence, you're not going to break his heart; you're not *going* to, Lyn, I won't let you.'

Lyneth was recovering from the shock of confrontation, was growing resentful. 'What business—?'

Christine's hand clawed ever more tensely at the white bosom of her dress. 'What business? Of mine? Dear God!—do you ask that? I gave him to you, I handed him over to you because you wanted it, you'd cozened him into wanting it, too. I took all your terrible burden upon myself, Lyn; for your sake and his I gave myself over to the ghosts, I lowered myself into hell. What business is it of mine?—do you think I'm going to suffer this daily, this hourly—this nightly—sacrifice just to see you go off on some new flight of fancy, leaving Lawrence alone—?'

'What use am I to Lawrence if I really love Arthur?'

'You don't really love Arthur, Lyn. It's just a bit of romantic nonsense, an escape from everyday life. If Arthur goes away, you'll turn back to Lawrence.'

‘What right have you to—?’ Lyneth sought evasion in digression. ‘All this fuss about your sacrifices! What’s so dreadful about it, after all? You’d lost Lawrence, there was no happiness for you any more, you said so yourself. Now you’ve got your ghosts—’

‘Who in fact are *your* ghosts—’

‘They let me go, they’ve no power over me any more.’

‘You’re still the Hilbourne bride, Lyneth. I changed places with you and they believed that I was the bride. But you are, really—that bride you were then. And if they came to understand that they’d been deceived...’ At the thought of their cold fury, a shudder ran through her thin body. ‘But if I must—I would tell them.’

‘Tell them what you like,’ said Lyneth. ‘I’m safe from them. They have no powers outside this house. Well, quite simply, I won’t go into the house again.’

Below them the little river splashed its way over its silvery stones, about them were bright flowers and the scent of roses; but they stood confronting one another and in all the warmth of the afternoon sun, were thrilled through with the chill of cold fear. Christine said at last, slowly: ‘You will have to come into the house, Lyneth. Because if you don’t, you’ll never see your child again. Until you go in and fetch her—she’ll stay in the house. She won’t be allowed to go.’

‘Not allowed—? Who will keep her there?’

‘I will keep her there,’ said Christine. ‘And the ghosts will keep her there. And—and you know it of old, Lyneth—the house itself will keep her there.’

Lyneth burst into tears again. ‘But if I come into the house—the house will keep me too, Christine. And I shall be in their power again. And if you tell them—if they’re angry...’

And yet... A new hope rose in her. She cried out: ‘The

Anathema! They've failed in the Anathema—they would haunt the bride, it said, but they haven't haunted the bride, they've failed in it. There's nothing to be afraid of after all: they've lost their powers, they'll revert back to their Other World and the search for the Light and all the rest of it. They'll never come back to Aberdar to haunt again.'

Christine said steadily: '*They* may not, Lyn. But *I will*.' And she left her sister and half running, stumbling, throwing out a hand for support to the balustrades of the terraces, pausing for breath, driven on by the sound of her sister's footsteps behind her, she made her way up, half-fainting to the house and ran through the hall with its new-lit fire, and into the library and there stood, utterly exhausted, in the doorway.

Tetty was there, sitting as though frozen in the big old wooden armchair that had been here in this room since unremembered time; the little girl crouched, cowering, against her knee.

And the ghosts were there.

The child, set down, had run in ahead of Lady Hilbourne and found Tomos in the hall on his knees before the great fireplace. 'I'm lighting a few sticks, Miss Christina, to make us all warm... Oh, m'lady, with your ladyship's permission—it seems so cold today indoors, even if there's sunshine outside. I thought I'd better light a fire or two for this evening.'

'Yes, very well,' she said absently.

'And one in the library, m'lady? You'll be sitting there after dinner?' With Tante Louise gone, she had somewhat altered her habits, preferring to the more elegant rooms, the low-ceilinged library with its smell of polished oak and the leather bindings of the books—upstairs Christine would be

communing with her ghosts and it was an agony to be with her. 'Yes, Tomos, thank you,' she said again vaguely.

Christina clung to his hand. 'Tina light fire wiv Tomos, Tina help Tomos!'

'Yes, yes, darling, we'll go with Tomos.' She dropped her shawl on to the arm of a chair and led the way through to the library and when the man was gone, fell wearily into the Squire's old oak chair and stared bleakly into the flames that flickered and curled about the dry wood, reaching up bright hands towards the coals. The child, seeing herself abandoned to her own pursuits, stood on tiptoe to reach the treasures on the desk beneath the window—there was a gold seal with the family crest carved in agate which was a familiar delight. She took it over to the fire and crouched down as close as possible to its warmth. For it was very cold in here.

Very cold—though through the multitude of little squared-off panes, the late afternoon sunshine still shone bright. A foreboding, thought the woman sitting staring into the fire. It had always come when something terrible was going to happen, the cold—this kind of cold. And now... How ill, down there on the terrace, Christine had looked! If Lyn were really to leave Plas Dar, to run away, to desert Lawrence... And she heard that young voice in her ears, that once so much-loved voice, Lyn's voice: 'Look inward, Tetty, and see whose fault it is! If I'm cruel and wicked, it was you who made me so; deep down inside you, you're cruel and wicked yourself...' And: 'If I condemned my sister to take my place in the life she leads now—you abetted me in that...' Oh, God, she thought, how black and withered is the bough of that once green tree that was so fresh and lovely when I was young...!

She was roused by footsteps, running, stumbling. The

door was flung open and Christine almost tumbled into the room. She looked dreadfully ill, her white face patched with high colour; seemed hardly able to catch her failing breath. She stood reeling in the doorway. She said: 'You're here!' But she was not speaking to her step-mother.

Tetty cried out: 'The ghosts...!'

Once before she had seen them like this: as in a dream had heard the rustle of silk against silk, had caught in the flicker of firelight, Rembrandt gleams of jewels and gold; had known the strange, musky scent that once again pervaded all the room. Once before in a—dream?—the little governess, promoted all in an hour to be mistress of this age-old house, of all this great domain—lying back, half-fainting, in the big oak chair that perhaps had been here when they'd come in their silks and velvets to plead their lost cause. And now they were come again, they stood there before her: the woman so dark and beautiful, with her curving figure like a painting by the French artist, Ingres—in glittering ruff and great blue velvet hooped skirt; the young man with his curling red-gold hair, in the doublet and hose of his day, the coat of softest leather hanging over one shoulder, the dagger at his thigh, and at his ear the great, softly gleaming, dangling pearl. And she heard their voices. They cried out together: 'Lyneth!' and 'Lyneth!'

Christine leaned in the doorway. Holding her side, gasping, as pale as death. She said: 'I came to tell you this, Richard. I am not Lyneth. I am Christine.'

'Christine—?'

'Lyneth was the bride. I took her place. We thought you need never know.'

They seemed to shrink into themselves, to lose something of their bold beauty, standing gazing back. Lenora said: 'You deceived us?'

‘Lyneth wanted to marry and be happy. She wanted to go away from Aberdar and not be—not be haunted...’

The little girl, Christina, whimpered and trembled. She asked wonderingly as she had asked a little earlier, in the hall: ‘Aunt Lyn! Nobody dere?’

‘Lyneth,’ said Lenora, and, all a-glitter with its great jewelled rings, her white hand shook, ‘what have you done?’

‘Have I brought you to harm?’ said Christine. ‘I’ve broken the chain of the Anathema?’

‘What does it mean to us?’ said Richard to his sister. ‘She has destroyed it.’

‘It means that we are destroyed with it,’ said Lenora. ‘We are lost. The cycle is broken, we can never come back.’ And she seemed suddenly to regain whatever terrible power was invested in her still, and turned upon the cringing girl. ‘You’ve done this to us! You’ve destroyed us, reduced us to nothingness. We shall be there for ever now, in the Other World, shades among shades, groping our way through the grey curtains of mist, wandering, wandering.’

‘Towards the Light, Lenora?’

‘That is beyond our reaching, little brother, who have clung for so long to this world, wreaked so much bitter vengeance here: who took our own lives, extinguished our own sparks of the Light. We shall be wanderers for ever.’ Her fingers curled themselves into claws. ‘What powers have we left while there’s yet time, what hell can we let loose upon her for the hell she condemns us to—?’

But Richard went across and took the cowering girl by the arm, and brought her forward into the room; and now she did not shudder from the misty dankness of the touch of his dead hand against her hand, for she herself was growing very close to death. Death from no cause but that she had

no will any more to live: the death that down the ages had come, strangely and without visible symptoms, to the brides of Aberdar. He recognised it also. He said to his sister: 'We won't hurt her. We can't hurt her. She's very close to us now. And we love her.'

'*You* love her,' said Lenora. 'Long, long ago, with my death, I came not to understand the meaning of the word. But you died for love; you have never entirely lost the sweet taste of it.'

'Then let me love her still. Do nothing to hurt her. She meant no harm—only goodness towards her sister. She gave herself up to us, she suffered—a living creature spending her life with us who are dead.' And he threw out his hand, ringed also and sparkling. 'Look at her! What more do you want? She's dying, we've killed her...'

'It's their fate to die,' said Lenora. 'That is the whole point and meaning of the Anathema: that they shall pine and suffer and die—the brides of Aberdar.'

'But she was not a bride,' said Richard.

Lady Hilbourne sat silent, turned to stone; even the child seemed paralysed, looking on with wide blue eyes, small hands clasped on the seal of agate and gold, engraved with the family crest. Christine seemed not to see them. She faltered: 'If I have harmed you—'

'You have destroyed us,' said Lenora. 'Already...' And indeed already to the silently watching woman, they seemed less brilliant, the beautiful pair standing there before the fireplace: their colours less glowing, their jewels not so bright. Richard said, shrinking back, 'The shadows, Lenora—the grey veils of the Other World—closing in on us.'

'They are closing about me too,' said Christine.

'Yes,' said Diccon. He held out his hand to her and his

hand was as grey as ash now, and as fragile. 'Will you love us, Lyneth, when you share death with us?' But he corrected himself. 'You aren't Lyneth. Lyneth was the one who cheated us—for reasons of her own, Lenora, not like this lovely, sweet one, in selflessness.' The ashy hand fisted itself, he lifted up his white face beneath the pale silver sheen that had been so bright an aureole of red gold. 'She is the one who should be punished for ever more.'

'Don't waste your last strength in anger,' said Lenora, as pale as he. 'Already it has grown to be a feeble thing. We have lost the power to punish.'

Christine said in a voice low but terrible: 'Give me the power and when I am dead, I will punish her for you. For you and for myself.'

'Punish her—?'

'Teach me how to come back from the Other World, teach me to haunt this world as you have haunted. If you can't come back, let *me* come back and use the same power over Lyneth, false, wicked Lyneth, as you have used through these long years in your eternal revenge...'

'You are a living creature,' said Lenora. 'How can we invest you with the powers of a ghost?'

'Then let me die. I would so much rather die.'

Richard said, 'But when we are gone—would you still wish for death? You would be free: you could gather back your strength, there might yet be a human lifetime of happiness before you.'

'There would be no way then to punish Lyneth. Lyneth has betrayed us all, she has betrayed her husband—her love and mine.'

'If she should return to him—'

'How can she return? She has broken her faith with him. And betrayed all my sacrifice. I must have revenge.'

‘She is close to death,’ said Lenora, very quietly to her brother. ‘The love is ebbing out of her heart. She wants only cruelty and revenge.’

‘She is like you,’ said Richard.

‘You died of love, Diccon, and even in death, retained some part of your heart. It has been all our weakness. She is dying, but she’s dying in hatred, all she wants and ever will want now, is revenge. *I* know. So let her come with us; she has no place any longer in this world of theirs.’

‘Then...’ the voices dying away, diminishing as they themselves diminished away into ghosts, into nothingness. ‘Then Lyneth—Christine—come with us, dearest, come with us, come with us...’

‘Put your arms about me, Diccon, hold me, communicate your death to me, let me die and go with you. And if I have lost to you, your need for vengeance, then I will take it on my own dead shoulders, and carry it on for you...’

Their arms were about her and it was as if a grey mist enfolded her. And the mist grew thinner and thinner and was there no more: nothing remained but a girl in a white dress lying on the floor in the glow of the firelight in that old, dark room.

Lyneth, hesitant, frightened, just outside the great front door, heard a single scream of terror and ran forward through the hall and into the library. Her step-mother was crouched on the hearth-rug, holding the dead girl in her arms; and the child... The child was talking, with up-lifted face, smiling and bobbing, holding out eager small star-fish hands—to someone who was not there.

CHAPTER 23

NOW EVEN THE OUTSIDE world seemed darkened, as though a black cloud had passed over, obliterating all the summer sunshine. No light in the room but the flicker of firelight on polished oak panelling, and the gentle, warm glow of leather-bound books. Lyneth stood in the doorway her hand fisted against her mouth. 'Oh, God, Tetty! Oh, God, oh *God!* Oh, Tetty, no—not Christine!'

Her step-mother crouched on the floor, her crinolined skirt spread all about her, holding the slender white figure in her arms. 'She's dead, Lyneth.' She laid her scarred cheek against the harsh pale hair that had once been so soft and sweetly curling. 'Oh, Christine, my lovely darling! She's dead, Lyn, she's dead.'

'Tetty,' said Lyneth, her mouth stiff, 'look at Christina!'

Christina in her bright summer dress with the lace-edged drawers peeping out, calf-length, below—bobbing and bowing, holding out her little hands, all smiles and eagerness—infinately pathetic, terrifying, grotesque. 'Lyneth,' said Tetty, 'she said—Christine said—that she would carry on the Anathema. She would be revenged.' And she pleaded with the white-clad figure, lying like a broken flower in her arms, 'Oh, Christine, my darling, no—not this!'

Lyneth said frantically: 'The ghosts—?'

'They've gone, they've vanished, they've—gone back. But now Christine...'

'She wouldn't be so cruel,' said Lyneth, bitterly weeping. 'She couldn't be so cruel.' She rushed over and took the little girl into her arms. 'Come to Mama, darling—Christina talk to Mama!'

But Christina wriggled herself away and ran off across the room. 'Aunt Lyn not go 'way, Aunt Lyn, Aunt Lyn—!' and as though in propitiation, held out the golden seal. 'Look what Tina got! Tina give it to Aunt Lyn?' Lyneth followed her, tried to hold her but again she struggled free. 'Not want Mama. Want Aunt Lyn.'

Lady Hilbourne knelt upright now, the dead girl forgotten, staring in utter terror at the capering child. She prayed: 'Oh, dear God, Christine—if you're here, listen to me, listen to me! Don't do this, darling, don't punish us in this terrible, terrible way. If we injured you—'

If they had injured her! For a selfish whim, aided and abetted, as Christine herself had said—they had broken her happiness in two, she who had asked so little in life, but her only one true and for-ever love; had condemned her to communion with spirits, careless whether they be friendly or malign. 'Do you call me bitter, Tetty?' she had said, '—because from my prison upstairs I must watch her wearing the treasures that you should have guarded for me from her vanity and greed. I am very naked without them and my heart is like ice. And if one touches ice, one will feel the cold too.'

And Lyneth: 'If I am cruel and wicked, Tetty, it was you who made me so...'

And... 'I have a gift,' Hil had said to her, long, long years ago when still the young tree of her life had been fresh and green, before the lightning flash had come. 'I—know things. And I know that one day far into the future, you will betray us. You will destroy us all.'

That day was come.

She stumbled to her feet. She went over to where the child still danced and smiled. She too addressed the unseen. 'Christine—hear me! If I can lift this burden from you... If

they would release you... After all,' she suggested, desperate with anxiety, 'I also was a Hilbourne bride.'

Lyneth cried out: 'Tetty?'

'If I could take Christine's place, Lyneth. If I could give my life for hers... You would go back to Lawrence, Lyn—?'

'Oh, Tetty, yes, yes! Anything, anything. I'd try...'

'Plead with them, too Lyn. They may not yet be so far away; plead with Christine...!' And she knelt again, taking the little girl in her arms. 'Ask your Aunt Lyn, Tina, ask her very nicely, say please, please do this for me, please, please take Tetty into the Other World and come back to us instead.' And as the child only stared at her, uncomprehending, she insisted: 'Ask Aunt Lyn—just say please, please, let me go!'

'Don't want to go,' said the child. 'Tina stay with Aunt Lyn.'

'Christine, for God's sake!—hear me, listen to me! Don't punish this child for my sins.'

Lyneth looked down into the upturned, happily smiling small face, framed in its dancing curls. She said: 'Tetty, I don't think it's Christina who is being punished. It's you and me.'

'Oh, Lyneth—Christine always so gentle and kind: could she really break your heart like this?'

'After all,' said Lyneth and fell again into a storm of weeping, 'I broke hers.'

Outside the sun shone bright again, but in this dark room it was piercingly cold. They were silent, only the child chattering happily away, running back to the desk to fetch another toy to be shown to—nobody. Lyneth said at last: 'Will Christine never let me go?'

'It is not the same curse,' said her step-mother. 'They didn't haunt children, the curse was upon the brides of this

house. But the house... Will the house still imprison you, Lyn?—will it imprison the child?

‘And if not?’ said Lyn. ‘If I take her and never bring her back—?’

‘Aunt Lyn says, Tina come back,’ said the little girl. She asked wonderingly: ‘To Aunt Lyn?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said her mother. ‘You shall come back. But come with Mama now, darling.’ She caught the child and lifted her. ‘Come now with Mama, Tina, and come back to Aunt Lyn another time.’

The little girl struggled and cried. Lady Hilbourne said: ‘Can Christine—? Those others, they couldn’t haunt outside the house. Is it the same for Christine?’

As though in reply—‘Put down, put down!’ cried the struggling child and, set down on her feet again, ran to the centre of the room, holding out an eager hand. ‘Aunt Lyn come in the garden wiv Tina? Come and play in the garden?’ Disappointment spread across her little eager face. ‘Can’t come in the garden? Aunt Lyn can’t come out?’

‘Christine has given the answer,’ said Lady Hilbourne. To the nothingness in the room, she said: ‘Christine—tell the child. Tell us the terms of your curse upon us. To punish us, Lyneth and me—you will haunt Christina? But you won’t hurt her—?’

‘Aunt Lyn not hurt Tina,’ said the child, protesting. But again her face changed, took on a shadow of fear. ‘If Tina’s good.’

‘Oh, Tetty,’ said Lyneth, ‘if she’s good! *If* she’s good—if she does what Christine wishes, if she leads the life that a ghost decrees she should lead. If she doesn’t... *You* couldn’t know, but Christine—the living Christine—she and I knew very well what that could mean.’ She went if possible even more white, her hands shook with fear. ‘Oh, my poor baby!’

Still and quiet, the dead girl lay half-forgotten. Her stepmother said, looking down at the thin face that had been so lovely, 'She could never be cruel to Christina, Lyn, she loves her.'

'She is a ghost now,' said Lyneth. 'Ghosts can't feel love, they have no hearts. Richard—I don't know, Richard seemed sometimes to be—different. He said once that he had loved our mother; but Lenora said, "How could you love her, there's no such emotion in you. You are dead and the dead have no heart for loving." And Christine is dead.' To the unseen Christine, she begged: 'Will you let me take her now? You say you can call her back.' She went to the child, tentatively, picked her up, acquiescent and, finding herself free, rushed out with her through the hall and into the sunlit garden; and they were gone.

They were gone; and I am alone, thought the weeping woman, crouched beside the dead girl, lying all askew now, ugly with death, on the hearthrug. Alone in this great gloomy old house—living out the rest of my days, alone with a ghost. So many years since she had come here, a girl in all the green freshness of her youth; and the lightning flash had come and riven in twain the blossoming tree of her life and into the dark and withered fork of the tree, had poured all her bright spirit. The ghosts, she thought. I believed I had got off scot-free, I was free of their haunting. But I was a bride of Aberdar, I was going to him—who is a Hilbourne also—as a bride; I was about to become in fact, however little I then knew it, a bride indeed to a Hilbourne of Aberdar Manor. Was it likely that I should escape their malignity? They turned my thoughts to darkness; and now they punish me for the sins of their own creation. All my life has been a punishment at their hands and this is the

ultimate punishment, to be lived out for the years that remain.

Yet—need the years indeed be long, need they come at all? Here in this room, firelit now as it had been firelit then, that young, young man had pulled out his bright dagger and for love of a girl, destroyed his own life. Here but an hour ago, a young girl for vengeance had taken his dead hand in hers and willed herself to die. Can I not die too then? Why need I continue to live?

To die? To take her own life? Or—simply to leave this place. What keeps me here? Would the house itself restrain me? But no, for a time had been when she herself had been a bride of Aberdar, and whatever tricks they might to her destruction have played with her spirit, her body had been free to go when she would. The house in itself would not keep her; and their power was gone.

But they would keep her. The house would keep her; Christine, a ghost, would keep her. The old power was gone, but a new power was in their hands. For the baby, Christina, must come to the house if Christine summoned her; and how could Lyneth endure, she thought, to watch her child dancing and posturing, all alone, a puppet in the hands of the merciless dead? I must remain she thought, to be here when she comes. And she would come: the pale ghost would summon her back, poor little bewildered child, the innocent instrument of vengeance. I must be here when Christine calls for her; and it can only be to this house, because nowhere else has Christine the power to haunt...

Nowhere else! Only here in this house, in this old, dark, gloomy manor house of Aberdar.

If there had been no Aberdar...

But if there were to *be* no Aberdar...

She wasted no time in indecision; ran to the great hall,

furiously pressed on the bell to summon Tomos. ‘Get all the servants out of the house! Take them out by the back doors; keep them away from the house!’ And almost before, bewildered but obedient, he had gone, she had caught up the Paisley shawl from the chair where she had tossed it but an hour ago, and thrust it into the fire he had been lighting there. The fine wool took the flame and, whirling it about her, she rushed from window-curtains to upholstery of couches and chairs, flung on to the smouldering horsehair the contents of an oil lamp smashed against the wall and spilling its contents over the dry old oak panelling; heaved open the great door so that the draught might drive the conflagration before it up the oak staircase, into the salons with their delicate furniture, ready-made sticks to keep the bonfire a-flame...

And heard low laughter: and they were there, pale as shadows, faint as a mist through which their fine jewels glimmered like sequins on a veil. And they called in their thin voices, ‘Christine! Christine! Christine, come to us while we still have even so frail a handhold with this world on earth. The house is going, not even you can haunt it then. Come with us, forget your anger, your vengeance. Come with us and we can be together for all time in our wandering through the Other World.’

She came through from the library, the white shadow in the white muslin dress she had worn in life. ‘I can’t come with you. I dare not betray the Anathema. I should be for ever an alien, poised between this world and the Other World, never to belong to either. I could never come back.’

‘We are aliens too, Christine. We failed also in the Anathema; we belong nowhere, we are wanderers. Come with us, move with us through the grey shadows and they need not be so grey—’

‘I can’t leave before I have exacted my vengeance,’ said Christine. ‘I must steal Lyneth’s treasure from her, as she stole mine from me.’

‘Christine, the house is burning—there is nowhere for you to come back to, you can haunt here no more...’

Tetty stood in the centre of the great hall and felt nothing of the heat of the flames licking up to the old wooden linen-fold panelling of the walls. ‘Christine, I can hear your voice now, your ghost-voice; even, dimly I seem to see you. Darling, dearest Christine, forget this terrible threat—tell me that you can’t still exact it, now that the house has gone?’

Did you think you could still control me, Tetty, as you did when I was a child? Do you think you can command the dead? Your strength is gone. I have been with the dead for so long and now I, myself, am dead—you have no power over me, whatever you may do. I will still be revenged.’

‘Then—revenge yourself upon me, Christine. Let me die here in the flames, let that be enough.’

‘You betrayed *me*, Tetty. But Lyneth has betrayed Lawrence, and my love for him, and his love for her. That’s where my vengeance lies. Not upon you.’

But now the musky scent was there, all too well remembered: and in the light of the flames, the glitter of jewels unseen. And the fading voices: ‘Christine, the Other World is closing in about us, come with us, there’s no more time. A moment and we shall be gone...’

‘Let the wind of your going fan the flames,’ she cried out to them, ‘burn the house, let it burn, let it burn fast!—and for that brief time while it burns, wait for me: and then I shall be with you.’

And the fire roared up anew, surging towards the floors above, far sooner than any ordinary blaze could have

reached them. Tetty stood there, unmoving, in the centre of the great hall. 'Christine, I could not live, I won't live, with the knowledge of what I have done, to bring all this terrible thing to pass...'

The dim voice said: 'It matters nothing to me, Tetty, whether you live or die. Either way, you will be punished enough. I ask nothing more of you.'

And suddenly—Hil was there, standing in the blackened orifice of the doorway, looking with horror at the tottering staircase that led up to the old nursery rooms, in the west wing; and cried out: 'Christine?'

She said dully: 'Christine is dead,' and moved her head in a gesture towards the library.

He flung himself towards it, forcing his way through the flames devouring the wooden framework of the doorway, and in a moment returned, holding the dead girl, ungainly, in his arms. 'For God's sake, Tetty—are you still here? Get out of this place, the whole house is tumbling in, are you mad?' And as she remained as though transfixed—still carrying his burden, he thrust out roughly at her with his shoulder. 'Move, get out!—must I put her down, let her be here to be consumed by the fire, because you won't stir to save yourself?' And he barged at her again with his shoulder, pushing her towards the open doorway. She stumbled before him, out into the open air.

Outside on the terrace, Lyneth stood with Christina held close in her arms. 'Oh, Tetty, Tetty, you're safe!' At the front door they encountered Arthur Hilbourne, arms across his face, preparing to plunge into the blazing hall; Lawrence was smashing with his fists at the panes of the library window, shouting out Christine's name. They stood, stricken, the two young men, staring at the burden carried in Hil's arms. Hil said simply: 'She's dead.' The tears were

running down his cheeks.

Lawrence stammered out, 'Is there anyone left in the house?' But no, Tomos had been sent to warn the staff before the fire had started. Tetty shook her head dumbly. 'But go down to the stables,' said Hil, 'help get the horses to safety. All the outbuildings...' He blundered on with his burden to the steps of the terrace, stood for a moment indecisive. 'Oh, Christine—my sweet, my darling...! Where shall I lay you down?' and he went with her at last down to the lower terrace and laid her very gently on the grassy pathway and folded her white hands on the breast of the white muslin dress; and caught up a flower from the bright border and put it between the lax hands; and came away, leaving her there.

And so the old house burned: the ancient timbers of the roof collapsed, and brick and stone rained down with a heart-sickening crash: around the little squares of the panes, the lead was melted, the windows bulged outwards and crumbled, exposing the greedy flickering of flame within. They stood huddled on the upper terrace, staring spell-bound as a brief hour wrought the destruction of all that had taken so long to grow, and endured four hundred years more. Lyneth hugged her child close in her arms, her step-mother stood dazed and exhausted, clutching to herself, not knowing that she did so, the scorched remains of a Paisley shawl, brilliantly patterned against the dull brown of her dress, the small dogs crouching, whimpering, about her hems. The young men together with the staff were fighting to save the outer buildings, the bakehouses and laundries and dairies, the coach house and stables. But Hil remained and, as dusk began to fall, said heavily: 'I think the end is coming. It hasn't been—human: no house could burn like

this, in so brief a time. But now it's gone. Aberdar has gone for ever.'

Only the porch intact, with its heavy, clumsy old pillars from behind which long ago they had darted out, those two small figures of enchantment, and straight into the lonely young heart of Miss Alys Tetterman: where, yet, it had suddenly struck her so chill, where first she had seen that look in Hil's blue glance, of foreboding and fear. Only the solid old porch still standing and a yawning blackness slashed through with great tongues of flame, where the wide oaken door had been.

Well—the fear was over now: the ultimate terror. 'You are safe,' she said at last. 'You are safe, Lyn. You and the little one. Where there is no house, they can haunt no more.'

Lyneth clasped the child close. 'Oh, Tetty—Christine?'

Tetty glanced warningly towards Hil, almost imperceptibly shook her head: why add to his pain by the history of the past hours? 'The ghosts could haunt only within the house,' she said. 'Now the house is gone.'

'And Christine has gone?'

'Christine is dead,' said Hil, heavily. 'She is lying down there with her blue eyes closed for ever, and flowers in her hands. She is gone.'

And the little girl cried out: 'Aunt Lyn!', and struggled down from her mother's arms, suddenly powerless to contain her, and ran towards the ravaged house. In the blackened doorway, with its background of falling timber and flame, Christine stood in her white dress and held out to her welcoming arms.

They stood in anguish, held by some force they could not control, unable to move. Lyneth screamed out: 'My baby! Get her back, call her back!'

But the little thing trotted forward not even glancing back over her shoulder. 'Aunt Lyn! Aunt Lyn!'

'She is there,' said Lady Hilbourne, 'Oh, dear God!—Christine is there. And *they* are with her—the others are with her there.'

Standing there, one on either side of her—faintly, faintly, only faintly to be discerned, imploring in their dying voices, 'You must come with us, Christine, come! There is no more time.'

'We are going to the Other World,' said Christine to the child, holding her little hand. 'Just a little while, and we'll be so happy there; you'll be happy there, darling, always with your Aunt Lyn...'

But the child looked back into the house with frightened eyes. 'All fire, Aunt Lyn!'

'Yes, yes, darling, but soon it will be forgotten, soon we shall be far away.'

'Christina go 'way now,' cried the child, beginning to whimper, beginning to try to pull away her hand. 'Too hot!'

'She'll be killed,' cried Lyneth, screaming. 'She'll be burnt alive! They're shades, they're ghosts, they feel nothing, but she... Oh, my poor little girl—!' and Hil fought frantically against a power that held him fast where he stood. 'I'm helpless, I can't get free—!'

'Do you see them, Hil?' said Tetty.

'I see no one. Only that Tina is standing there close to the flames. Why doesn't she come back?'

'I can see them,' said Tetty. 'And hear their voices. After all—I was once a Hilbourne bride, I'm a part of it all.' And she called out urgently, across the intervening space, 'Christine—set me free, let me come to you!'

'I am taking Tina with me.' To the child now piteously sobbing, wrenching at the tightly clasping hand, she said,

‘Hush, hush, my darling! It’s nothing—you see, Aunt Lyn feels nothing.’

‘She is a living creature,’ cried Tetty, imploring, her voice raised to carry above the sounds of the falling masonry and crackle of flame. ‘You are a shade, Christine, you feel nothing. But she’s frightened of the heat and the flames, and soon she must die in agony if you don’t let me come to you and take her away.’ And as the child still screamed and struggled, she insisted, ‘Will you torture her, Christine, because you must torture us? You who in life were so gentle and kind—’

‘And happy,’ said Christine. ‘It’s easy to be kind and gentle when you’re happy. But you and Lyneth between you—you ended all that. I’m not kind any more, I feel nothing in my dead heart but anger and revenge. And to punish you, I’m taking Christina into death with me, into the Other World, the world of shades...’

In five minutes, thought Tetty, the fire will have reached them, they will be engulfed in the flames; and when the screams have ended, she will be gone; and Christina will be gone too, the darling of our hearts, into the Other World, and that will be the end—to which for Lyneth and me there will never be an end. But at a sudden crash as a light spar of wood fell, smouldering, and a scream from the child, she tore herself forward from the chains that seemed to bind them all to helplessness and somehow impelled herself nearer to the burning house. ‘Christine—you are Christine still! Look at her little hand!’

Across the back of the plump wrist, so white and sweetly dimpled—a searing scar where the burning wood had fallen, suddenly flaring. The child sobbed, ‘Aunt Lyn—Tina hurt, Tina hurt—!’

Tetty forced herself ever forward, fell on to her knees.

‘Oh, Christine—darling, have mercy, have mercy! Not upon us, Christine, not on Lyneth and me, we will give up our lives to you. But this tiny child—’

Lyneth, crying out from where she stood as though frozen into immobility. ‘Christine, take my life—in the fire if need be—but don’t let my baby die in agony...! Oh, Christine, my other half, my twin, my sister—find it in your generous heart to forgive me—to have pity. Forgive me!’

Growing fainter now, diminishing, the dying-away voice. ‘I am a ghost now, Lyneth, I have no heart—not to pity nor to have mercy—no heart to forgive. I am a ghost, I am dead.’

‘For love, Christine,’ said Tetty. ‘You are like—that other one. You died for love.’

‘If I find love now in my dead heart,’ she whispered, ‘I must go for ever to a place where there is no love: no love, no pity for *me*, no hope, no Light to wend my way to; no ending, for ever...’

The voices were gone: only their echo, faintly calling. ‘No more time, Christine... No more time... If we leave you, if we are parted now—then we lose you forever. Exact your revenge, bring the child with you, but come with us, come with us...!’

Faintly, as though through a mist, they all saw her now, for a moment, the white form standing erect in the dark hollow of the doorway, holding the little girl’s hand in her own hand, the white form that fell away to grey ash, trembling, frail; saw how at last she bent and lifted the child’s little hand to her cold, dead lips and released it, and remained for a moment while it ran towards its mother, holding out the dimpled arm with the ugly mark of the burn across the wrist. And heard a voice almost imperceptible to the ear: ‘I am coming... Wait for me, I am coming...’ And

she was gone.

And the solid, stout old pillars of the porch collapsed and crumbled into nothingness; and the whole world seemed for a moment suddenly absolutely still.

‘And so Aberdar burned down,’ said the girl to her sweetheart, sitting there nested in the tawny bracken, where soon the green shoots, curled like bishops’ crooks, would come springing through: looking across the stream to the tumbled ruins, the broken terraces all starred about now with long-neglected flowers. ‘And everybody went away, the new house was built on another remote part of the manor, and that was the end. Hil lives still in the house up above, and he comes down sometimes and walks among the ruins; but if you ask him if there are ghosts there now, he says: “No. Only me.” He is getting old now, Hil, and his eyes are always sad. I think he would be glad if he might see a ghost sometimes—if he could see Christine with her blue eyes and her soft, fair hair, just as young as she was in those old days—his lost Christine.’

‘Perhaps she will one day stop for a moment in her wandering,’ said the boy, and lean out “from the gold bar of heaven” and call to him. She seems to have been so sweet and kind, the real Christine.’

‘Oh,’ said the girl, thankfully, ‘you do understand? You do accept it all, this old, frightening story? And it hasn’t changed your mind?’

‘I accept it. It’s like a sort of dream,’ he said, ‘and as a sort of dream, one must accept it. But of course it changes nothing between you and me.’

The duenna was coming back, walking down the wooded path, moving at her regular, stately pace, the hems of her brown dress with its smoothly rounded bustle,

brushing the faces of the woodland flowers, upturned to see her pass. And again the young man thought, How strange she seems! How erect and colourless amidst all the flowery green! But the girl leaped up and ran to her, throwing an arm in easy, familiar affection about her spare shoulders. 'Now he knows it all, the whole story, every word of it. And there you are, Tetty, I told you!—he doesn't mind a bit.'

And she put out her other hand to her lover; and for the first time he observed across her slender wrist the white mark of an old, forgotten scar.

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